Dragon Workshop

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Chapter 1. An Ordinary Man

Pavel loved oak for its straightforwardness. Oak did not forgive carelessness and did not hide flaws under varnish — if you made a mistake in your calculations by even a millimeter, the wood would remind you of it a year later, when the joint began to breathe and "cry." Pavel's workshop smelled of linseed oil, dry shavings, and the faint chill of chisels. Here, the world was understandable and structured, like annual rings, each of which bears its own mark of time.

For Pavel, faith has always been like the structure of wood. It is not an external finish, not gilding that can be scraped off with a fingernail, but something that permeates the material from within. He never wore badges, never put up posters on the walls, and never raised his voice. His "testimony" was in the quality of the joints on an oak chest of drawers. In the fact that he never took "left-wing" orders bypassing the workshop cash register. In the fact that he returned a piece of expensive veneer found on the floor, which someone else would have simply taken home.

The morning in the workshop always began with a ritual similar to a liturgy, although Pavel would never have dared to make such a comparison. He arrived half an hour before his colleagues. At that time, the workshop belonged only to him and the faint smell of linseed oil mixed with the sharp sourness of fresh oak shavings and the subtle, honeyed aroma of pine rosin.

Pavel approached his workbench—massive, scarred by years of labor, but perfectly clean. First, he took out his tools. Swedish chisels with handles made of kap, a well-worn plane whose blade had been sharpened to a mirror finish. He picked up a whetstone, dripped a little oil on it, and began a measured, meditative movement — sharpening. The metal against the stone made a thin, hissing sound, like a whisper.

For Pavel, it was like "calibrating a compass." Each pass of the steel across the stone helped him cut away unnecessary thoughts, the anxieties of the previous day, and the vague hum that was increasingly coming from the outside world. It was hygiene for the soul: before touching the clean material, he had to clear his inner space of the rust of irritation or the burrs of pride. Only when the tool became an extension of his hand — sharp, precise, and obedient — did he consider himself ready to begin work.

By eight o'clock, the workshop was filled with people and noise. Boots stomped heavily, machines clanked, and a fine dust suspended in the air danced in the rays of the morning sun.

— "There you go again, Pasha, restless as ever," grumbled Savelich, a foreman with forty years of experience and a face resembling the bark of an old elm tree. He sat down heavily on a stool next to Pavel's workbench and reached for a pack of cigarettes, but, remembering that smoking was not allowed here, he just twirled it in his hands. "Are you still polishing your tools? We have a truckload of orders, deadlines are looming, and he's chamfering edges where no one will even see them.

— The wood will see it, Savelich," Pavel replied, without looking up from his work. He was running a plane along a wide board of stained oak. Long, almost transparent shavings, smelling of tannins and ancient swamps, curled out from under the blade. "If I cut corners here, the lock won't fit tightly. It will look beautiful on the outside, but inside it will be empty."

— "You're a saint, Ivanov," smiled Kolka, Pavel's assembly partner, a young and perpetually busy guy. "How does your wife put up with you? You never swear, and you don't even join us for a drink on Fridays." Are you even human, or just a machine with software? Savelich says you spend your weekends sitting around with books instead of doing what normal people do—going fishing or chasing girls.

— People are different, Kolya," Pavel put down the plane and carefully ran his hand over the surface of the board. The oak was cool and dense to the touch, its texture felt like a relief map of an unknown country. "I just don't want to ruin the material. Neither the wood nor myself. Every word, like every cut, leaves a mark. If you saw crookedly, no amount of putty will cover it up.

Savelich looked at him with a mixture of respect and deep incomprehension. In the world of the workshop, where speed, resourcefulness, and the ability to "negotiate" with the bosses were valued, Pavel seemed like an anomaly. He was too reliable, too predictable and at this frighteningly independent in his silence. His "holiness" was perceived by his workshop comrades as a strange but

harmless quirk — like collecting stamps or believing in aliens. They did not see his decency as a manifesto; they saw it as a lack of "vitality."

— "You, Pasha, are like that oak tree," Savelich finally got up. "Strong, yes. But too inflexible. Look, they'll break you someday. These are the times we live in — you have to be able to bend like a willow, lean with the wind. But you're always checking your angles."

Pavel remained silent. He knew that willow rots faster than oak, but explaining this would be an act of the very pride he had so diligently avoided during his morning "calibration."

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The way home lay through an old park and several blocks of typical five-story buildings. The city was full of noise. From the windows of cars came snippets of news about new laws, threats, and the need for unity in the face of invisible enemies. Billboards displayed slogans calling for vigilance. Pavel walked through this noise, trying to maintain the rhythm set by the planer that morning.

He went into a store and bought bread and a carton of milk. At the checkout, the saleswoman, who had known him for many years, looked away strangely. It was a new feeling that had begun to seep into his life a few weeks ago — a slight chill of alienation. It was as if he had an invisible mark that people read on a subconscious level. He was still "one of them," the usual Pavel the carpenter, but there was already a smell of ozone in the air before the storm.

At home, he was greeted by the smell of cozy warmth—a mixture of brewed willow tea and freshly laundered linen. Elena, his wife, was bustling about in the kitchen. She was not beautiful in the usual sense of the word, but there was a certain "honesty of character" that Pavel valued above all else.

— Tired? She came over and simply rested her head on his shoulder. She smelled of lavender and domestic peace.

— "I'm fine, Len. A little tired, but it was a good day. Work was calm." How about you, did you get anything done today?

Their life was simple, almost ascetic, but without any harshness. This simplicity was evident in the way Elena carefully sewed up her retired neighbor's torn jacket, in the way they listened together to Anya, their twelve-year-old daughter, who talked about school matters.

Anya sat at the table, surrounded by textbooks.

— Dad, the history teacher said today that those who don't share common values are like dry branches, they need to be cut off so that the tree doesn't get sick.

Pavel sat down opposite his daughter and took her slender hand in his—broad, calloused, with wood dust ingrained in its pores.

— You see, An... A tree grows not because its branches are cut off, but because its roots go deep into the ground. If the root is healthy, no storm can harm the tree. And "shared values" are often just paint on a fence. Today one thing, tomorrow another. The main thing is what you have inside, your own blueprint.

The evening passed quietly. Pavel did not yet know that in a world that had decided to become monolithic, even a perfectly fitted groove could be considered an act of resistance, and the silence of an honest person could be the loudest cry that the system could not forgive.

Chapter 2. Corrosive Dust

The workshop had always been a place where chaos took shape for Pavel. Here, among the workbenches and stacks of boards, the world obeyed the logic of drawings and fibers. But recently, a new, foreign smell had crept into this space, which smelled of resin, linseed oil, and

old shavings. It wasn't wood. It was the smell of overheated plastic and static electricity from an old Horizon TV that Victor, Pavel's partner, had brought from home and mounted on a bracket in the corner under the ceiling.

The TV was on constantly. Its rattling sound drowned out even the screech of the circular saw, seeping through protective headphones like fine, pervasive dust.

Pavel stood at his workbench, working on a panel door made of ash. Ash is a capricious wood, light in color, with a sharp, almost graphic pattern. It demanded precision. Pavel carefully guided the chisel, removing the chamfer, but his attention kept slipping to the screen, where frames of operational footage: broken doors, books scattered across the floor, people in camouflage pressing an elderly man in a worn jacket against the wall.

— ...during large-scale anti-cult raids, the activities of another cell have been suppressed, the announcer said in a staged, doubtless voice. "Experts warn that behind the mask of piety lies a threat to our spiritual security. The brainwashing techniques used by these destructive organizations are aimed at destroying the foundations of the state and the family..."

Pavel felt the chisel slip slightly, leaving a barely noticeable scratch on the light wood. He stopped, breathing heavily.

— "Listen, Pasha," Victor turned off the sander and nodded at the screen. His face, always red from exertion and cheap tobacco, now expressed eager curiosity. "They're being cracked down on, and it's about time. Look how they've multiplied, like bark beetles in a rotten log. They whisper their prayers, but I bet they're working for foreign countries. What do you think?"

Pavel didn't look up. He picked up a sanding block and began methodically sanding the damaged area. His silence was familiar, but today it felt different — like a dam that was about to burst.

— "I'm working, Vit," he said. "The door has to be delivered by Friday."

— Forget about your door! Victor came closer, wiping his hands with an oily rag. Look at what they say. "Spiritual security." That's serious. My neighbor's nephew got involved with an agency like that, and now he doesn't recognize his own mother. He wanted to transfer ownership of the apartment. They brainwashed him, huh? Tell me, you're a well-read, quiet man... Aren't you afraid that people like that are walking around nearby? They're silent, they smile, but they have a virus in their heads?

Stepanich, an old cabinetmaker sitting at the other end of the workshop, joined the conversation. He rarely participated in arguments, preferring the wisdom of old tools and strong tea.

— Vitya, keep it down, Stepanich said, adjusting his glasses on the tip of his nose. The virus isn't in our heads, it's in the air. Look at all the dust flying around. They haven't cleaned the ventilation again. You can't breathe.

Stepanich looked at Pavel. There was no condemnation in his gaze, only weary, understanding caution. He knew that Pavel was "one of those." But now Stepanich saw what Victor didn't notice: Pavel wasn't just silent, he was hiding.

— Come on, Stepanich! Victor waved him off. You always blame everything on ventilation. And here we have experts! Look, some professor is speaking. All dressed up in his regalia. He says it's like a cancerous tumor. If you don't cut it out in time, the whole body is doomed.

A man with a beard and a sharp gaze did indeed appear on the screen
— the very same Professor Dvorkin whose words Pavel had already memorized. Dvorkin spoke about "mental hygiene" and how "the silence of the adepts is a form of aggressive concealment of the truth."

Pavel felt acrid dust clogging his lungs. He wanted to turn on the planer so that its roar would drown out that insinuating voice. He wanted to immerse himself in his work, dissolve into the fibers of the ash wood, become part of this wood that knew neither politics nor fear. But the machine did not save him.

The words around him grew thicker. They stuck to his clothes, they creaked between his teeth. Victor, fueled by television pathos, continued:

— You, Pasha, are always silent. You can't get a word out of you. And this Dvorkin says, "Those who are not with us are hiding something." You do everything by the rules, you don't drink, you don't smoke, you're so honest... But maybe that's just a cover too? Maybe you're secretly worried about our "security" in your own way?

His silence, which had always been a form of modesty for him, suddenly became heavy, like a wet oak beam. He understood that every moment he did not agree with Victor, every moment he did not nod in time with the announcer's words, he was committing a crime. "The sin of silence."

— "Vitya, leave the man alone," Stepanich said again, but his tone no longer had its former confidence. He, too, felt the change in the density of the air in the workshop. "You see, he can't work. The dust is especially acrid today."

—What am I? I'm just asking, Victor grunted, returning to his workbench. It's just strange. Everyone is talking about it, the whole country is discussing it, but Ivanov is living in a bubble. Either he's afraid of something, or...

He didn't finish his sentence, turning on his sander. The workshop was filled with noise again, but for Pavel, the silence had already been broken. He looked at the ash tree under his hands. It was a beautiful tree. But now it seemed naked to him, defenseless against the settling dirt.

He remembered the metaphor from the Bible about the seed that fell among thorns. In his reality, the thorns were not prickly bushes. They were the sounds of the television, the insinuating voice of the professor, the suspicious squinting of his colleague. They suffocated him, preventing him from breathing.

In the corner, the television continued to blaring. The announcer moved on to the weather, but the background remained unchanged. The same alarming music, the same intonations of inevitable struggle.

"If I remain silent now," he thought, "this silence will become my prison. If I speak, it will become my sentence." The workshop, his refuge, was turning into an interrogation room, where the lights were too bright and the air was thick with suspicion.

— Pash, Stepanich approached him when Victor went to the smoking room. The old man spoke almost in a whisper, not looking Pavel in the eye. "You should... be careful. Vitka isn't evil, but right now, all he can think about is what's coming out of the box. These are the times we live in, you understand? Everyone wants to be 'clean,' and cleanliness is now understood as... as the absence of shadows. You cast too many shadows with your silence."

Pavel looked at Stepanich.

— Everything that has volume casts a shadow, Stepanich. Flat things don't cast shadows.

The old man sighed, his shoulders slumped.

— Volume isn't in fashion now, son. Plywood is in fashion now. Thin, uniform, glued together under pressure. Be careful not to get caught under that press.

Stepanich left, and Pavel was left alone with his door. He took a deep breath, and for a moment it seemed to him that he was suffocating

from this invisible, acrid mist. He remembered Dvorkin's words about "spiritual security." For the professor, security lay in sterility, in the absence of "foreign" fibers. For Pavel, however, safety lay in roots that went so deep that no dust on the surface could poison the source.

The day dragged on endlessly. By evening, the workshop was plunged into twilight, and only the TV screen continued to glow with a cold, dead light. Leaving the workshop, Pavel turned around. Victor had already left, leaving the TV on — "for background noise," as he said. Stepanich sat by the window, looking at the dusty poplars.

Pavel went out into the street. The air of the provincial town was heavy with smog and the smell of blooming linden trees, but he still felt that acrid dust. It was everywhere: in the conversations of passersby, in the headlines of newspapers at newsstands, in the wary glances of neighbors.

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— Pash, did you hear that? Elena nodded toward the screen, where Professor Dvorkin, an ideologist with a neat beard, was discussing the need for "surgical intervention in the tumor of destructive cults." They talk about you as if you were hiding bombs in your basements.

Lena did not share her husband's beliefs, but this difference did not become a chasm between them: in their home, love, peace, respect, and the habit of listening to each other were more important than identical answers to questions about God. Pavel's friends of the same faith often visited, but this did not bother her in the least. She often heard their conversations from the next room and sometimes listened in, but more to understand what exactly fascinated him about their communication.

—"We're not hiding bombs, Lena," Pavel replied quietly, putting down his cup of tea. "We're just reading the same book that they banned in their translation." She touched his hand.

— Dvorkin said that "conspiratorial study of literature" is a sign of the enemy. Now they even consider closed curtains a crime.

Pavel looked at the window. Outside, the provincial town of N. lit up with dim streetlights. Dusty poplar trees stood motionless. The world around him remained the same, but its meaning had been turned upside down: now, a simple prayer in the kitchen was referred to in legal documents as "the continuation of the activities of a banned organization."

Chapter 3. Error in the Drawing

On Monday, the air in the workshop seemed particularly thick, as if someone had forgotten to air it out after a long shift. The smell of fresh pine shavings, which usually invigorated Pavel, was mixed today with something disturbing and sour — smell of official fear.

Pavel worked on the front of the sideboard, carefully cutting a groove for the hinge with a chisel. It was delicate work that required absolute steady hands. But today his hands were acting strangely. A foreign, leaden heaviness settled in his fingers, and in his chest, just below his solar plexus, a cold, slippery lump stirred, preventing him from breathing deeply. Every time the workshop door slammed, Pavel caught himself involuntarily jerking his shoulders up, clenching his neck.

— "Pash, go see the boss," Savelich, the foreman, walked past without stopping or looking him in the eye. Before, he would have definitely slowed down, winked, and made some salty joke about the "holy man" behind the workbench. Today, his voice sounded dry, like the crackling of old plywood. "To Andrei Petrovich. Hurry up."

Pavel put down his chisel. He carefully brushed the sawdust off the workbench— his habit of keeping things tidy was stronger than his

fear. Victor, his partner, was deliberately making a lot of noise with the sander, pretending to be completely absorbed in the process, even though the part on his workbench was already perfectly sanded. Stepanich, the old master, sitting in the corner, looked up from his glasses for a second. There was no sympathy in his gaze — only a silent plea not to bring trouble to their shared territory.

The walk down the long corridor of the factory administration to the director's office seemed endless to Pavel. The walls, painted a dull gray-blue, seemed to close in on him. He felt like a piece being dragged to the planing machine, where the blades were already set to maximum removal.

Andrei Petrovich sat at a massive desk, on which, among folders and telephones, a cup of half-drunk tea with a film floating on the surface sat forlornly. He was a man of "comfortable" forms: soft shoulders, a round face, an eternally apologetic smile. He was not evil. He was the type of person who sincerely believe that the world is held together by the ability to remain silent at the right moment and sign at the right moment.

—Come in, Pasha, take a seat, — the director nodded toward a chair without looking up from some papers. — How's the facade? Are we on schedule for completion?

— It's on schedule, Andrei Petrovich," Pavel's voice sounded muffled, as if coming from a well.

— "Good, good... You're an excellent craftsman, Ivanov. One of the best. You care deeply about the material, and I appreciate that."

The director finally looked up. His eyes showed a strange mixture of pity and irritation, the kind one feels for a person who has fallen into a trap through their own stupidity.

— Here's the thing, Pasha... We got an order from the city administration. And the education department passed it down through

their channels. As you can see, these are turbulent times. There are threats everywhere, these extremists... We need to do some preventive work in the team, so to speak. To confirm that we are all conscious people who support stability and order.

He pushed a sheet of paper toward Pavel. The text was printed in small, dense font, which immediately made Pavel's eyes sting. The headline read: "Collective appeal by employees of the furniture factory in support of state policy to protect traditional values and counteract destructive cults."

Pavel began to read. The words flowed smoothly, like a well-polished board, but their meaning stung like splinters. "We strongly condemn," "alien ideals," "mental viruses," "threat to the constitutional order." And at the end, beneath the vague phrases, was a list of organizations whose activities were deemed "hostile to the people." Among them, Pavel saw a name that was not a legal term to him, but a part of himself.

—Everyone has already signed, Pasha," Andrei Petrovich said softly, almost fatherly. "Savelich and Stepanich. Even your Vitka, although he's confused about the letters. It's just a formality. No one in Moscow will read these papers. We just need to check the box in the report: 'Prevention carried out, the team is united.'"

Pavel was silent. He felt the cold in his chest begin to turn into a throbbing pain. His hands, resting on his knees, seemed foreign to him, huge and clumsy. He imagined himself picking up a pen, the tip of the nib touching the paper.

In carpentry, there is a concept called "forced assembly." This is when you try to squeeze a tenon into a mortise that is slightly smaller or offset by half a millimeter. You can take a mallet and hit it. Hard, with all your might. The piece will go in. At first glance, everything will look perfect: a smooth joint, no gaps. But wood is a living material. It remembers violence. Critical tension will build up inside the fibers. A month will pass, the humidity will change, and the wood will not withstand it — it will burst with a dry, terrible crack, destroying the entire structure.

This paper was just such a "wrong spike."

— Andrei Petrovich," Pavel looked up, "it says here that these people — are criminals. That they pose a threat.

— Well, that's what the experts say, Pasha. All kinds of professors on TV. They know better, right? Our job is to make furniture, not meddle in politics.

— But I know these people," Pavel's voice grew stronger, even though his throat was dry. "They repair the same stools as we do. They don't steal, they don't drink, they... they're just different. Signing this means saying that white is black because that's what the order says.

The director sighed and leaned back in his chair. He looked genuinely upset.

—Listen, Ivanov. You're a good man. I respect you. But don't be so... straightforward. Life isn't a flat oak board that can be smoothed with a plane. It's crooked and gnarled. Sometimes you have to sand down your conscience to fit into the overall picture. Do you think I like it? My mother-in-law herself...
— She used to be into Scientology. But after all the fuss that was made, she gave it up for good. Do you understand how it all happened? At some point, all these checks, persecutions, and talks about banned organizations began... She was told that she could be accused of having ties to extremists. It was horrible. She had to quit so as not to come under suspicion. That's all, Ivanov. Think about what will happen if your name isn't on the list.

— What will happen? Pavel asked quietly.

— The checks will begin. Unplanned ones. Fire department, tax department... They'll start shaking you down. They'll remember everything: your "strange" days off and your silence. Your neighbors are already talking, the director lowered his voice to a whisper. Belova from

forty-two, she works in the administration. She asked about you. 'Why is Ivanov so quiet? And who visits him on Saturdays?' Do you want them to come and search your place tomorrow? Do you want them to drag your Elena around the offices? Why, Pasha? Because of a piece of paper that will be handed over to the archives in a week?

Pavel looked at his palms. There was ash dust under his fingernails. He remembered yesterday evening: Anya was doing her homework, Elena was baking bread, and the house smelled of warmth and peace. This was his world. His blueprint. And now they were offering to buy this world for the price of one small misstep. "Just sign here."

He felt nausea rising in his throat. If he signed, he would return to the workshop. Savelich would joke again, Victor would offer him his favorite tea again, and dust would once again be just dust, not a "poisonous fog." Everything would be "normal." But every time he approached the workbench, he would know that the tool in his hands no longer belonged to him. He would know that the seam on his soul was rotten.

— "I can't," he said. The words came out heavy, like granite boulders.

— "What do you mean, 'I can't'?" The director stopped smiling. His face turned gray, like wet concrete. "You can't sign? Will your hand fall off?"

—There's a mistake in the drawing, Andrei Petrovich. If I make it now, everything will collapse. Not right away. Later. But it will collapse for sure. I can't testify against the truth. It's like covering a rotten core with varnish — shiny on the outside, but rotten on the inside.

Andrei Petrovich stood up abruptly. The cup on the table clattered.

— You're selfish, Ivanov! — genuine, raw resentment cut through his voice.

—You only think about yourself, about your "purity"! What about the factory? What about the guys? If, because of your stubbornness, we are all declared "unreliable," will you be able to look them in the eye? Stepanich, who has two years left until retirement? Victor, who has three children? You are putting them in danger with your holiness!

It was the most painful blow. In a world where collective survival was always placed above personal salvation, Pavel suddenly found himself the aggressor. His silence turned into a weapon directed against those with whom he shared bread and sawdust.

— I'm sorry it looks that way," Pavel said, standing up too. His legs were shaking, but his back straightened on its own, like a beam held under pressure. "But if survival requires lies, then we are no longer living. We are just rotting together.

He looked at the blank sheet of paper. It seemed dazzlingly white, like snow, on which the bloody streak of his betrayal was about to appear. But there would be no streak.

— Take your facade, Ivanov, — the director turned away to the window, where the gray courtyard of the factory was visible behind the dusty glass. — Finish it and... I don't know. They'll call me from above and ask. I'll say you refused. Do you understand what that means?

— I understand.

Pavel left the office. The corridor was empty. The hum of the machines from the workshop reached him muffled, like the sound of a distant train.

When he entered the workshop, silence fell. Even Victor's grinder fell silent. Dozens of eyes were watching him. There was no heroism in those looks. There was boredom, irritation, and fear. He was a spare part, a piece from another set that did not want to "fit" into the overall design.

— Well, what? — Savelich approached him, wiping his hands with a rag. —

Signed?

Pavel silently walked over to his workbench. He picked up a chisel. The metal was cold, honest.

— No, he replied without turning around.

Someone spat behind him. Victor cursed loudly and turned the machine back on. Stepanich lowered his head, as if hiding behind his drawings. The vacuum around Pavel closed in completely. He was alone among people for whom this compromise was no more valuable than a pinch of sawdust.

Pavel put the blade to the wood. He could feel the wood resisting, living under his hand. He knew that now every stroke of his drunk, every blow of the mallet would be an act of extremism. His normality ended here, in this office, on this sheet of paper.

The coldness in his chest remained, but the heaviness in his hands was gone. Now they were light and precise. He knew what he was doing. He simply continued his inner blueprint, even if the rest of the world had decided to build according to crooked patterns.

Chapter 4. Cracks in the Core

The walk from the gate to the house always took exactly twenty minutes. It used to be a time of "decompression," when the hum of the machines and the acrid smell of varnish gradually faded from his mind, giving way to thoughts of dinner and Ani's lessons. But today the city

seemed different. The air was saturated with moisture, that heavy, sticky dampness that makes even the most durable wood "warp" in the workshop. Pavel could feel it with his skin: the world around him began to warp, to lose its right angles.

The familiar courtyards of the Khrushchev-era apartment buildings were no longer a safe space. Now every glassed-in balcony seemed like an observation post, and every passerby a potential witness to his "failure." Pavel walked, staring at his shoes, and in his head, like a broken record, the director's words kept repeating: *"Egoist."*

He froze at the door to his apartment. He was used to thinking of home as a place where everything fit together perfectly, where everything was tailored to his conscience. But today he was carrying a contagion inside him—invisible, like a fungus that eats away at wood from the inside before the first spots appear on the surface.

Elena was in the kitchen. The sound of the TV from the living room—Anya was watching some cartoon—seemed deliberately loud, creating a false background of normality. Elena didn't turn around when he entered. She was methodically, with some frightening zeal, cutting cabbage. The knife tapped the board too often and too hard.

— "He's here," she said quietly. It wasn't a question.

— He's here, Pavel said, taking off his jacket. His hands felt heavy, as if filled with lead.

She slowly put down the knife and turned around. Her eyes were red, but she wasn't crying—yet. It was worse than that. In her gaze, Pavel saw the same mixture of pity and horror that he had seen in Andrei Petrovich's office, but mixed with a deep, soul-sucking helplessness.

— Savelich went to see his daughter Lida. And she called me," Elena said quickly, swallowing her words. "Pash, why? Why did you do that? It's just a piece of paper. Lida says everyone signed it. Even Vitka, who's always cursing the government when he's drunk. Everyone!

Pavel took a step toward her, wanting to touch her shoulder, but she pulled away as if his hand could burn or infect her.

— Len, listen... That paper contained lies. Blatant, rotten lies. If I had signed it, I would have...

— You would have saved our lives! she whispered, afraid that Anya would hear. Our lives, Pasha! You think about "lofty matters," about your purity, but I think about the fact that they're coming for us tomorrow. Did you see what they showed on the news? The same "honest" people are sitting behind bars. Is that what you want? For Anya to look at you through glass?

She suddenly covered her face with her hands and burst into tears. It wasn't the cry of anger. It was the cry of helplessness in the face of an avalanche rolling down the mountain, impossible to stop with your bare hands. She sank onto a stool, her shoulders shaking slightly.

Pavel looked at the back of her head, at the stray strands of hair, and a terrible struggle began inside him. An inner voice screamed*, "Go to her! Hug her! Tell her that tomorrow you'll go to the principal, apologize, sign anything, just so she'll smile again!"* It was so simple—one compromise, one small curve in the drawing, and the world would be smooth again. He imagined how they would go to the sea in August, which Anya had been dreaming about for a year. He imagined peaceful evenings when the smell of sawdust would not be mixed with the smell of fear.

But as soon as he placed the tip of his pen on that white sheet of paper, he felt physically sick. It was like with a tree: if you know there is a crack inside an oak tree, you can fill it with putty, cover it with a thick layer of stain, and hide it under varnish. On the outside, it would be a magnificent cabinet. But one fine day, under load, it would collapse, crushing everything stored inside. Because the inner truth of the material had been violated.

— I can't lie to myself, Lena," his voice sounded hoarse. "If I betray what I believe in, I will cease to be the Pavel you love. I will become dust.

— And then you'll become a prisoner! — she looked up at him, her face covered in tears. — Number Ivanov P. V. Is that better? Pasha, others sign it and nothing happens! They go to the same church, pray... Do they believe less? Or are they just smarter than you? We were planning a vacation... Anya is waiting... Have you thought about her? She's at an age when she needs her father nearby, not in letters stamped by the censors!

Her every word was like a blow to a sore spot. Pavel felt like a criminal, not before the state, but before this woman who had shared bread and silence with him for so many years. His honesty now seemed like the highest form of selfishness. His loyalty to God was turning into betrayal of his family.

At that moment, the doorbell rang. It was a long, insistent ring that took Elena's breath away. She jumped up, staring at the door in horror.

— "Is it them?" she whispered.

— "No," Pavel frowned, recognizing the heavy footsteps behind the door. "It's my father."

The parents entered the apartment, bringing with them the smell of cold rain and valium. The father, Viktor Petrovich, was wearing his old storm coat, his face looking as if it had been carved from gray granite. The mother, Maria Ivanovna, clutched a bag to her chest, her lips trembling slightly.

They did not take off their coats. They entered the kitchen like a commission, like a tribunal.

— Well, master... — his father did not say hello. He sat down on a free chair, placing his heavy, gnarled hands on the table. In his eyes, Pavel saw not just anger, but the harsh, oppressive anxiety of a man who had experienced everything — from shortages to the collapse of the country — and had developed a single rule: don't stick your neck out. "Finished playing the saint? Savelich told me everything. He says Ivanov has joined the opposition.

— Pashenka, son..." His mother sat down on the edge of a stool next to Elena. "We've only just started to live peacefully. Why are you provoking them? Well, they asked you to sign — sign. It's like a community work day. A formality!"

— Mom, this isn't just a formality. It's a list of people I have to declare criminals.

— Let them be cannibals for all I care! — my father slammed his palm on the table. — What's it to you? Answer for yourself! Do you understand that this is Article 282? It's prison, Pasha! Real prison, with criminals and lice! You won't last a day there with your honesty. They'll break you for your sweet soul, and no one will remember how principled you were.

Victor Petrovich leaned forward, his voice breaking with hoarseness.

—Your mother and I sacrificed our lives so that you could make something of yourself. So that you would have golden hands and a job. And what are you throwing it all away for? So you can spit in some investigator's face with your silence? They'll wipe you out, Pasha. Like dust off a workbench. And Elena will be left alone. And our granddaughter will grow up without a father. Have you thought about that "divine" thing?

Pavel stood at the window, looking out at the gray twilight of the courtyard. He felt the fibers inside him tightening. It was like a centuries-old oak tree resisting a hurricane. As long as the tree is alive, it is flexible and can sway in the wind. But if the core is too rigid, if there is no room

for maneuver, the tree will not bend. It stands until the very end, until the tension reaches a critical point. And then there is a dry, terrible crack that can be heard throughout the forest. The tree splits along the grain, splitting to the very root.

Now he felt that crack inside himself.

—Pash, just tell them... Elena looked at him hopefully. Tell them you'll go tomorrow and fix everything. Andrei Petrovich said it's not too late. He'll hold onto the papers until morning.

Pavel turned around. Three pairs of the closest eyes were looking at him. There was love in them, but now that love felt like a vice. They were offering him salvation at the cost of his soul. They were asking him to become "normal" — that is, to become a liar.

— "I won't be able to work tomorrow," Pavel said quietly. "If I sign, my hands will stop feeling the wood. I won't be able to look at Anya and teach her to be honest if I become a coward myself."

— Who needs your honesty if you end up in jail?!—his father shouted. There was almost physical pain in his voice. —Do you think you're a hero? You're just a fool, Pasha! A proud fool! You value your purity more than our lives. Your mother has already had three drinks this evening. Elena is beside herself. You're killing them with your stubbornness!

Her mother sobbed quietly, burying her face in Elena's shoulder. The quiet horror in her eyes was unbearable. For her, prison was not a legal term. It was a dark basement from which there was no return. She did not understand "high matters" or theological disputes. She simply saw her son being taken away by people in uniform, and this image burned her from within.

— Pashenka," she whispered. "Please... For my sake. Just sign a piece of paper. God sees that you're not doing this out of malice, that you're being forced... He will forgive you.

Pavel felt a lump rising in his throat. He wanted to fall to his knees before them and beg forgiveness for the pain he was causing them. He was not a hero from a book. He was a man who was terrified and felt unbearable pity for his loved ones. His choice was not a triumph of will — it was a painful, bloody sacrifice that he offered on the altar of truth, and this sacrifice was steeped in the suffering of his family.

—God sees, Mom... he replied barely audibly. That's exactly why I can't. If I betray Him now, I'll have nothing left. No family, no job, no self. Only a shell that walks and breathes, but inside which is rot.

His father stood up. His face was pale. "So that's how it is," he said, and there was a final, terrible crack in his voice. "If they take you away... don't count on us. I'm not playing your games. I've worked honestly all my life, and I won't let you disgrace our family name with 'extremism'.

He walked to the door without looking back. His mother hesitated, then looked at Pavel.

— . There was so much unshed love and fear in that look that Pavel wanted to scream. But she obediently followed her father.

The door slammed shut. Silence hung in the apartment, heavy as a layer of centuries-old dust. Elena sat motionless, staring at the knife lying on the cutting board.

— "You destroyed us, Pasha," she said without tears, in a dead voice. "You just took our life and cut it in half."

She got up and went into the bedroom, closing the door tightly behind her.

Pavel remained alone in the kitchen. The cartoons behind the wall fell silent—Anya must have heard everything and was now afraid to come out. He looked at his hands. There were small scars from the chisel on his knuckles, and oak and ash dust had gotten into the pores.

He went to the window and leaned his forehead against the cold glass. The internal tension in his muscles had not gone away. On the contrary, it had become permanent. He knew that wood that had been "affected" by moisture would never be the same again. It could be dried, it could be clamped in a vice, but the memory of the deformation would remain in the cells forever.

Its "normality" had been shattered into pieces. He had made a choice, and that choice had cost him everything he loved. It did not feel like a victory. It felt like a carpenter looking at a broken, expensive piece of wood that he himself had ruined because he could not work with rotten material.

It was raining outside the window. The city of N. was falling asleep, not yet knowing that in one of its apartments, a man had just voluntarily signed his own death warrant by refusing to sign someone else's lie.

Chapter 5. Formulation of the Charge

Dawn in the city of N. was always gray, as if it had been strained through an old flour sieve. At 6:12 a.m., the light barely touched the windowsill in the Ivanovs' bedroom, illuminating dust particles suspended in the heavy, still air. Pavel woke up not from the sound, but from the vibration. The old panel door, which he had repaired himself three years ago, adjusting each spike with millimeter precision, responded to the first blow with a low, guttural groan.

Then came a crash—metal against wood. The sound of material betrayal.

— Open up! Police!

Pavel sat up in bed. His mind, accustomed to the clear lines and logic of the physical world, refused to accept reality for a moment. He looked at his hands — the broad palms of a carpenter, covered with a network of small scars. These hands had the power to create, but now they seemed useless.

Elena screamed, clutching the blanket. Her face looked like a white wax mask in the dim morning light. It wasn't just fear—it was recognition. The very "voice of fear" that had lived inside her since April 2017 had finally taken on flesh and sound.

— Pasha, it's them... Pasha, Anya! Her voice broke into a hoarse whisper.

He didn't answer. Throwing on an old robe, Pavel went out into the hallway. Anya was already peeking out of the nursery. She was twelve — an age when the world should be expanding, not shrinking to the size of a peephole. She stood in her ridiculous panda pajamas, clutching a toy to her chest, her eyes, huge and dark, resembling those of an animal caught in the headlights.

The knock repeated. The hinges clanged plaintively. Pavel turned the lock.

The door swung open, letting the smell of tobacco and cheap government-issued cloth into the sterile silence of the apartment. Five men in camouflage and two in plain clothes filled the tiny hallway, squeezing the life out of it.

— "Pavel Viktorovich Ivanov?" asked one of the plainclothes officers. He was short, with neat hair and the face of a man who takes his boring but necessary work very seriously. "Special Investigator Major Volkov. We have a search warrant."

Volkov walked into the living room without taking off his shoes. His soles left dirty, wet marks on the light laminate flooring. For Pavel, who was used to changing his shoes even in the workshop, it was like a slap in the face.

— "Lena, take Anya to the kitchen," Pavel said quietly.

— "No one is going anywhere," Volkov said, opening a leather folder. " Everyone stay in the same room. Witnesses, come this way.

Two neighbors timidly entered the apartment—a sleepy student from the third floor and a retired woman named Aunt Valya, who immediately looked away when she saw Pavel. Her gaze conveyed not anger, but a sticky, paralyzing shame of witnessing someone else's disgrace.

The search began methodically, like the cutting up of a carcass. The people in camouflage weren't just searching — they were dismantling Pavel's familiar world. They shook out books from the cabinets, leafing through each page with such zeal as if they were looking for dried insects. They opened the linings of jackets and looked behind baseboards.

Volkov did not participate in the chaos. He slowly paced around the room, lingering at the bookshelves and Pavel's crafts. His gaze stopped on a small box made of Karelian birch standing on the dresser. Pavel had made it for his wife on their tenth wedding anniversary.

Volkov picked it up and turned it over in his hands.

— "Good work, Pavel Viktorovich," he said, and there was something in his voice that sounded like sincerity. "The texture, the fit... You love wood, don't you? You understand its essence?"

Pavel stood by the wall with his arms crossed. Elena sat on the sofa, hugging Anya. The daughter was trembling slightly, and this rhythm was transmitted to her mother.

— "I love it," Pavel replied. "There is no deception in wood. It either bears the load or it doesn't."

Volkov smiled subtly. He opened the box, poured several buttons and an old brooch onto the table, then looked inside, tapping the bottom.

— That's the problem, Ivanov. As a carpenter, you should know that sometimes a log looks perfect. Healthy bark, strong trunk. But as soon as you put the saw to it, black sludge flows from the core. Hidden rot. It's not visible from the outside, but it changes the structure of the grain. It makes the wood unsuitable for building a state.

The investigator turned to him, his gray, cold eyes fixed on Pavel's face.

— We are not here for your prayers, Pavel Viktorovich. We are here for "sanitary felling." Your faith is not a religion. It is a mental parasite. In the terminology of our experts, it is called "destructive influence on the psyche through the introduction of antisocial attitudes."

— "I'm just reading the Bible," said Pavel. "That's not a crime." Volkov sighed,

like a teacher who had heard a deliberately incorrect answer.

— "Continuing the activities of a banned organization by imitating a religious cult," he quoted, enunciating each word carefully. "Your tea parties with like-minded people, your discussions of texts— these are not leisure activities. This is the reproduction of an extremist cell. You are using the Holy Scriptures as a code. Our experts at RACIRS call this 'sectarian coding.' He looked at Anya. The girl cringed even more.

— You love your daughter, don't you? But do you know that your 'Bible lessons' are psychological abuse? You are depriving her of her right to socialise, to receive a blood transfusion in case of an accident, to celebrate holidays. You are implanting a virus of exclusivity in her. This is a social pathology.

— Don't touch her," Elena suddenly jumped up. Her fear, reaching its peak, turned into desperate, convulsive courage. "She's just a child! She didn't do anything!"

— She's a victim, Elena Nikolaevna," Volkov interrupted her gently. "And we're here to save her. If your husband doesn't understand the seriousness of the situation, perhaps the child welfare authorities will explain it better. You don't want your daughter to grow up in an orphanage while her father engages in 'spiritual resistance' in a general regime colony, do you?

Elena sank back onto the sofa. She began to sob silently, her shoulders shaking. The sound was worse than screaming. Pavel felt something inside him break. The investigator had struck at his weakest point, where he was most vulnerable.

— Comrade Major! One of the operatives stood up straight, holding Pavel's tablet in his hands. Found it. A group in the messenger app. Recent messages, quotes from the "forbidden book." And here's more...

He handed Volkov several printed sheets found in Pavel's toolbox. They were personal notes for a sermon, written by hand.

Volkov took the sheets with disdain, using two fingers.

—"Conspiratorial study of literature," he stated. "And here's the propaganda of superiority.

Quote: 'True knowledge is accessible only to those who seek...' See, Ivanov? You preach exclusivity: you divide people into 'the chosen ones' and 'the rest'. This is incitement to hatred or enmity on religious grounds. Pure Section 282.

Pavel looked at his notes. For him, they were thoughts about love and patience, written down in between sanding pine boards. In offices like the one Volkov had come from, these thoughts were turned into "tools for undermining the constitutional order."

—Do you know what's bad about hidden rot in wood? Volkov came up close to Pavel. He smelled of mint gum and old paper. It's contagious. If you leave one such board in a stack, in a year the whole warehouse will rot. You are an infection. It doesn't matter to us whether you are a good person or not. What matters to us is that you are a carrier of a virus that denies the supremacy of the state over the soul. And the state, Pavel Viktorovich, does not tolerate competition in this market.

— Pasha, tell them... Elena looked up at him, her face swollen from crying. Say you won't do it again. Say it was a mistake. Please, for Ani's sake!

Pavel looked at his wife. Her eyes pleaded for betrayal. She was asking him to break down in order to save their family. It was logical. It was human. But he knew the physics of the material: if you agree once that rot is normal, you yourself will become rotten.

—I can't say what isn't there, Lena," he replied. His voice was dry. Volkov shook his head in disappointment.

— Typical rigidity of consciousness. A specific symptom of cult dependence. Well, we'll treat him in the hospital.

The investigator nodded to the operatives. They approached Pavel.

— Stand up. Hands behind your back.

The metal of the handcuffs was ice cold. Pavel felt the rings dig into his wrists, restricting his freedom, but only physically.

Anya screamed and rushed toward him, but one of the witnesses stopped her. Elena burst into tears, covering her face with her hands. She swayed from side to side, and this pendulum of fear counted down the last seconds of their former life.

— "The search is over," Volkov announced loudly. "We are confiscating the equipment, literature, and records. Ivanov is being detained under Article 91 of the Criminal Procedure Code. Witnesses, please sign the protocol."

Pavel was led to the exit. He walked past his shelves, past the unfinished model sailboat on the cabinet, past Anya, who now just stared at him, frozen in silent horror.

He turned around at the door.

The apartment looked as if a tornado had swept through it. Pillows were torn apart, books were scattered, chairs were overturned. Amidst this chaos stood Major Volkov, carefully placing the confiscated Karelian birch box into a transparent bag for evidence.

— We'll find all the hot spots, Ivanov," he called after him. "The wood must be clean.

Pavel was led out into the stairwell. The cold air of the stairwell hit his face. He heard his door slam behind him—the very door he had so carefully adjusted. Now it was broken.

As he descended the stairs, Pavel thought about how rot is not faith. Rot —is when a person stops seeing the image of God in another person and begins to see them as "wood" for their own constructions.

A police van was parked on the street. Gray, like this dawn. The neighbor at the entrance, the one who had written the denunciation, crossed herself busily, watching Pavel go. There was no malice in her eyes — only relief that they had not come for her.

Pavel stepped into the dark belly of the vehicle. The door slammed shut with a clang, finalizing the accusation. In the darkness, he closed his eyes and began to pray— not with words, but with silence, which could not be confiscated by any search.

And outside the window of the police van, the city of N. continued to wake up, absorbing the gray light and the smell of petty, everyday betrayal, which had become the only way for him to survive.

Chapter 6. The Temptation of Integrity

The solitary confinement cell in the detention center smelled of bleach, rotten cabbage, and hopelessness. But even here, Pavel found structure. He calculated the rhythm of his steps from wall to wall, learned to tell the time by the strip of light on the ceiling, and got used to

the constant background noise—the shouts of the guards and the clanging of the feeding troughs.

Two weeks later, he was summoned to Volkov again. But there was a different man sitting in the investigator's office.

Professor Dvorkin looked like a university lecturer: a soft cashmere jumper, expensive glasses, a voice as smooth as molasses. On the table in front of him lay a sheet of paper and a pen. An ordinary ballpoint pen, which at that moment weighed more than an oak log.

—"Sit down, Pavel Viktorovich," Dvorkin pointed to a chair. "I've looked into your case. You know, I admire you. Such determination... It deserves better use."

— "Have you come to discuss my faith?" Pavel did not sit down.

— I came to discuss your future. And your daughter's future. With the label "daughter of an extremist"... well, you understand. And Elena? She's wasting away before our eyes. I spoke with her yesterday.

Pavel felt something tense dangerously inside him.

— Why are you touching her?

— We want to help," Dvorkin leaned forward. "Understand, the state doesn't need your suffering. The state needs stability. We understand that you are a victim of a mental virus. A destructive cult. They put false ideals into your head.

He pushed the sheet closer.

—Here's the text. A short statement. It says that you realize the harm your organization does. That you condemn its leadership methods and discredit the ideas that lead to social isolation. One signature, Pavel. And tonight you'll be home. We'll even reclassify the case so that you get a suspended sentence. You'll just go back to your workshop.

You will work with wood again. Doesn't the Bible teach humility before the authorities?

Paul lowered his eyes to the text. The words on the paper seemed gray and slippery. "Destructive influence," "anti-social orientation,"
"denial of civic duty." Every word was a lie, but this lie was packaged in the form of "salvation."

He imagined entering the apartment. The smell of home cooking. Lena burying her face in his chest, her shoulders finally stopping their trembling. It was so simple. Just a few grams of ink. A few strokes of the pen.

— "They're just words, Pavel Andreevich," Dvorkin continued insinuatingly. "God sees your heart. He will understand that you did it for your family. Isn't family the highest value?"

Pavel closed his eyes. The smell of wood shavings in the workshop came to mind. When he was making the groove, he knew that if he made it a little wider than necessary to "make the job easier," the part would fit into place. From the outside, everything would look perfect. But over time, the wood would dry out, the load would be distributed incorrectly, and the chair would break under someone. The whole structure would be a lie.

His faith was that very groove. If he now agrees to this "little crook" to save his livelihood, he would destroy the very thing that made his livelihood possible. He would become material that had lost its structure. Dust.

— You say these are just words," Pavel looked up at Dvorkin. "But my faith consists of words. The whole world was created by the Word. If I sign this now, I will not be renouncing the organization. I will be renouncing the very essence of who I am.

— Are you choosing prison over your wife and daughter? Dvorkin's voice turned cold. The mask of kindness slipped away, revealing the true face of anti-cultism.

— "I choose integrity," Pavel replied quietly. "If I return home a traitor, I won't be able to look Lena in the eye. I won't be able to teach my daughter honesty."

Dvorkin slowly put the sheet of paper back in the folder.

— "It's a pity, Ivanov. You really don't understand. Evil here doesn't wear horns. It just fills out forms. And you just filled out the form for your own sentence."

As Pavel was led back to his cell, he felt a strange lightness. The pressure hadn't gone away, but it was no longer destructive. He had passed the stage of temptation. His faith was no longer a theory from a book — it had become a physically tangible framework that kept his back straight under the guard's gaze. He realized that the silence for which he was being persecuted was not the absence of sound. It was the presence of something that could not be confiscated during a search and could not be bought with a single signature.

Chapter 7. Cell Geometry

The door slammed shut with that distinctive, final sound that only steel striking steel in solid concrete can make. This clang had nothing in common with the noble click of a lock in an oak door or the soft thud of a

pine door. It was the sound of an industrial press stamping a mark on a workpiece.

Pavel Ivanov was left alone in a space that his professional carpenter's eye instantly began to analyze. For a man accustomed to measuring the world by the quality of fibers and the density of wood, the detention center cell appeared to be a territory of "dead material." There was nothing here that had once grown, breathed, or reached for the sun.

The first thing Pavel did was touch the wall. His fingers, which still remembered the roughness of linden and the oily smoothness of walnut, encountered the cold, ulcerated flesh of concrete. The concrete in the cell was a "dishonest" material. Unlike stone, it had no internal structure created over centuries; it was frozen chaos, forcibly locked into formwork.

"Concrete doesn't breathe," Pavel thought, running his hand over the gray surface. "It absorbs heat, but never gives it back. It has no pores through which life could communicate with the world. It's a dead-end material."

The walls were covered with a "fur coat" — rough, prickly plaster designed to deprive prisoners of even the slightest tactile comfort. It resembled wood that had been scarred by a blunt saw and left unpolished sanding, so that every splinter dug into the skin. The density of this space was suffocating. If in the workshop Pavel felt "volume" — air saturated with the smell of wood shavings, which seemed almost tangible — here the air was flat. It smelled of bleach, old tobacco, and something sour that Pavel identified as the smell of "social decay."

The floor was cement, worn to a shine by thousands of soles that had lost their direction.

The first hours in the cell were like the state of a tree caught in a sharp temperature change. The fibers of his consciousness "cracked." The shock acted like a blunt cutter—it did not cut, but crushed his thoughts, turning them into a shapeless mass.

Pavel sat down on a narrow iron bed—a "shkonka." The metal was cold and resonant, lacking the elasticity that even the thinnest plywood provides.

He forced himself to breathe more deeply. In carpentry work there is a concept

"aging": freshly cut wood cannot be used immediately, it must "settle," release excess moisture, and get used to the new environment. Pavel began to consciously observe his shock, as if he were observing the deformation of a board in a drying chamber.

"Okay," he said to himself, "right now the fibers are tense. My heartbeat is like a cross- grain that interferes with a smooth cut. I need to find the center. Every log has a core, the densest and most honest part. Where is it in me?"

This transition from panic to cold, almost technical self-observation became his first tool of salvation. He began to notice details: how the light fell from the narrow "muzzle" of the window, how the water dripped rhythmically in the corner, how the "feeder" in the door rattled.

Pavel remembered how often customers asked him to cover expensive wood with cheap, shiny varnish or to glue veneer of valuable species onto ordinary pine. People like to appear to be something they are not. Prison did exactly the opposite.

It acted like a rough sander, stripping away everything superficial.

•**Layer one: Social status.** Pavel was no longer a respected cabinetmaker with a six-month waiting list. He was an "extremist," a number on a list, a body in a cell.

•**Layer two: Everyday habits.** Clean clothes, hot showers, the ability to brew strong tea in his favorite mug — all of this came off like old paint under the influence of a solvent.

•**Layer three: The illusion of security.** The 2017 Supreme Court ruling became the very sawmill that cut his familiar world along the grain in an instant, exposing everything he had tried to hide even from himself.

"Prison strips away the veneer," thought Pavel, staring at the gray ceiling. "It turns out that much of what I had was just a thin veneer. Politeness, calmness, even confidence in my faith... It was easy to practice in my cozy workshop. But what will remain when the veneer is stripped away? Will there be anything left but fear?"

He realized that the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, which he had read about in the news and which now affected him personally, was not just a legal absurdity. It was a global process of "testing for breaking." The system was looking for rot, knots, and cracks in the material. It was pressing on the weak spots, hoping that the wood would crumble to dust.

Pavel remembered the case of Dennis Christensen. He had represented this Danish man in the same cell somewhere in the Kursk region. What did that man feel when he was the first to be put under this pressure? Probably the same thing—the feeling that they were trying to "reshape" him according to someone else's mold.

The charge of extremism seemed wrong to Pavel. How could prayer be extremism? It was like calling a tree's desire to grow upward "extremist." The linguistic experts whose conclusions he saw in the protocol reminded him of bad carpenters who confuse rot with the natural grain of wood. They looked at the words of the prayers and saw a "hidden agenda" in them, just as an amateur sees a defect in a knot, not understanding that it is around it that the strongest texture is formed.

He closed his eyes and imagined how, in the silence of the cell, he would begin to work. Not with his hands, but with his mind. He began to construct in his mind an ideal temple—a building where every joint would be flawless, where truth would be the only glue, and fidelity the only coating.

Today, carpenter Pavel Ivanov began his most important work. Now the material was his own soul, and he had no right to make a mistake. The sanding began.

Chapter 8. Other prisoners

Evening in cell No. 402 did not come with sunset, but with a change in the background noise. The daytime clanging of bolts and footsteps in the corridor were replaced by a hollow, viscous whisper. The air, already heavy, became almost palpable— a mixture of the smell of cheap Prima tobacco, unwashed bodies, and the sour smell of government-issued soup, which seemed to have been absorbed into the prickly "fur coat" of the walls at the molecular level. After a month in solitary confinement, Pavel was transferred to a shared cell. New noises, new faces, but the feeling of isolation did not disappear — it hung in the air, as before, felt with every breath.

Pavel Ivanov sat on the edge of his bunk, trying to take up as little space as possible. His professional carpenter's eye continued to mechanically analyze his surroundings, and this analysis was disappointing. If the cell were a product, it would have to be burned as a hopeless failure. There was not a single straight line or honest angle in it. Everything here was warped, covered with layers of gray oil paint that hid cavities and cracks, like bad putty hides rot in wood.

Pavel has long been accustomed to classifying people according to the density of their inner fiber. Over the years of working in his workshop, he has come to understand that people are made of the same material. There are pine trees among people: soft, pliable, easy to work with, but quick to rot in the rain of circumstances. There are people who are like birch trees—tough, capricious, prone to internal cracks that are invisible until you start planing them.

In cell No. 402, he felt like a foreign body — a piece of Karelian birch that had mistakenly found its way into a pile of construction debris. His "otherness" here, within these walls, was more apparent than it had been on the outside. There, he was simply a "weird craftsman," but here his silence and lack of swearing were perceived as a challenge.

Opposite Pavel, on the lower bunk, sat Sedoy. He was the center of gravity in this cramped space.

The gray-haired man was not old in the literal sense, but his face resembled the surface of an oak stump left in the forest for decades. His skin was gray, furrowed with deep, harsh wrinkles that had become permanently etched with prison dust. His voice did not sound—it creaked like a dull saw on a dry knot.

But what struck Pavel most were his hands. The carpenter always looked at hands. Sedoy's were huge, with gnarled joints and skin like tanned sheepskin. They were the hands of a man who had never created, but always possessed. On the back of his hand was a blurred tattoo, like a clumsy hieroglyph.

— "Hey, carpenter," Sedoy slowly turned his head. His eyes were cloudy, like stagnant water in a swampy pond. "You're so quiet. Are you doing all your calculations in your head?"

Pavel nodded without looking up. "It's a habit."

— A bad habit for these parts," the gray-haired man spat in the direction of the long-distance truck.

— Here, you don't measure yourself, you fit in. And you're like a bone in the throat with your faith. Just squeeze a little, and you'll burst with a whistle.

A chuckle rippled through the cell. A young guy nicknamed Redhead, sitting on the top bunk, shifted uneasily. He was a classic "misfit" — a person with chaotic inner direction, unreliable and noisy.

— "Uncle Gray, he's our 'saint'," Redhead chuckled. "An extremist by grace. I heard on TV that they don't detonate bombs there, they dry out brains."

Gray-Haired stared at Pavel for a long time, as if trying to determine the density of his annual rings. Silence hung in the cell, interrupted only by the rhythmic drip-drip of a faulty faucet.

—"What's the charge?" asked the gray-haired man. Although he knew that everyone in the cell knew everything about each other within half an hour of arrival.

— "Two hundred and eighty-two, part two, section one," Pavel replied clearly.

— Extremism," Sedoy savored the word as if it were something bitter. "What a term they've come up with... Listen, Pasha, I've seen a lot in my life. I've beaten people up— and for good reason. I robbed a bank— that's understandable, everyone needs money. It's clear why I'm here. It's clear why Redhead is here—he stupidly snatched a woman's phone. That's the law of life. The strong take, the weak cry, the state punishes.

He leaned forward, and Pavel smelled cheap tobacco and old newspapers.

— But you... The gray-haired man shook his head. You're in here for a book. For reading psalms with the guys in the garage instead of drinking vodka? Explain it to me, I'm old, maybe I don't understand progress.

Pavel looked at the gray-haired man. There was no fear in his eyes, only deep, weary sadness. "My words, my prayer for them, are not an act of faith, but an act of resistance. My beliefs are not a choice, they are a weapon in their eyes.

— "Absurd," Gray-haired sighed. "It's rotten. It's as if I were being judged not for breaking into the cash register, but for thinking about money at all."

He leaned back against the wall.

— I'm looking at you, Ivanov. The system isn't eating you alive for your actions, but for not giving in to it. You don't break. And the system needs everything to be like clay — mold it into whatever you want, whether it's a cup or a sculpture.

Pavel closed his eyes. Sedoy's words echoed strangely in his mind. He remembered how he used to choose wood for important orders. The most beautiful and strongest wood was that which grew in harsh conditions, on rocks, exposed to constant wind. Its fibers were so tightly intertwined that they could not be cut with a regular chisel. But it was precisely this type of wood that was most difficult to fit into a standard interior.

The prison was a perfect cross-section of society. Here, in cell No. 402, all types of human material were represented. Here was Redhead — the "sapwood," a soft outer layer with no strength of its own, living off the juices of the core. Here was the sullen Vaha in the corner — "stained oak," blackened by malice and time, heavy and unpredictable. And here was Pavel himself — "otherness."

His fault was that his life was not approved by the city administration. He built his house on stone, while everyone around him

They built temporary shelters on the sand and were proud of it. The system couldn't confiscate his faith during a search—they took away Bibles, tablets, and notes.

In a world that constantly shouts, a person who knows how to listen to God seems like a dangerous madman.

"Prison isn't a place where they reform you," Paul thought. "It's a place where they test the quality of your hardening. If you didn't get to the right condition on the outside, here you'll either crack or be led astray so that you'll never recover. But if your core is intact..."

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The light in the cell suddenly flickered and turned dim yellow. It was time for the "night watch."

—"Shall we have some tea?" asked the gray-haired man. And that question sounded more like a command.

Redhead deftly jumped down, took out a kettle—two blades tied together with string—a forbidden but ubiquitous tool of prison life. Pavel watched as the water boiled in a plastic liter mug. There was a certain order and structure to this as well. Even in hell, people try to create a semblance of normal life.

—"Here, extremist," the gray-haired man handed Pavel a mug with thick, almost black chifir. "Take a sip. You look pale. You'll have to "organizing activities" here. From what I've heard, the prosecutors want to lock you up for a year.

Pavel took the mug. The plastic burned his fingers.

— Thanks.

— Listen, Pasha," the gray-haired man looked at him almost sympathetically. "Read your books in your head, don't read them out loud. The walls have ears here, and people have souls full of holes. They'll report you and not even bat an eye.

Pavel took a sip. The drink was unbearably bitter, but it brought back a sense of reality. He understood that Sedoy was right in his own way. In this environment, his honesty was like an open wound. But he also knew that a bad craftsman always complains about the material. A good one finds a way to work even with what he has.

Evening had finally turned into night. Behind the door, the guard knocked with his keys. Pavel lay down on the hard mattress, which smelled of centuries of dust. The cramped cell no longer oppressed him. He began to mentally review the events of the day, polishing each memory, removing the excess, leaving only the essence.

He was a carpenter. His job was to create order out of chaos, structure out of flesh. And if now his workbench was this cell, and his material was his own life under the pressure of Article 282, he had to do the job perfectly. Without knots or splinters.

Silence fell in cell No. 402. The gray-haired man breathed hoarsely in his sleep, the redhead tossed and turned on the top bunk, and Pavel Ivanov prayed. Not with words. The polishing continued.

Chapter 9. Conversation with the guard

The night in the detention center brings no peace; it only changes the register of sounds. The daytime chaos—shouts, the clanging of aluminum buckets, the barking of commands — is replaced by a viscous, multi-layered hum. In this hum, you can hear

the moans of those sleeping, coughing in neighboring cells, and rhythmic footsteps in the corridor, which Pavel has learned to distinguish by weight. The heavy, slightly dragging gait belonged to Sergeant Ivanich, a veteran of this concrete bag, a man who, over decades of service, had himself become part of the prison's reinforcement.

Pavel was awake. He sat on his bunk, his back pressed against the cold "fur coat" of the wall. After another interrogation with Volkov and the mention of his daughter, a splinter stuck in his soul — thin, sharp, it stung with every breath.

The "feeding trough" clanged. A small rectangular window in the door opened, letting a narrow beam of yellow, sickly light into the cell.

— "Not sleeping, master?" Ivanich's voice sounded not like an order, but with a kind of everyday, almost homely hoarseness.

Pavel raised his head. Only the sergeant's eyes were visible in the window opening—faded, surrounded by a network of wrinkles, resembling old tree stumps that had lain too long in the sun and rain.

— "I can't sleep," Pavel replied quietly.

—That's understandable. It's always like that before a transfer. Thoughts are like bedbugs—they bite harder at night, Ivanich paused, jingling his keys. "I was looking through your file in the duty room. I'm looking at it and I can't figure it out: you seem like a serious man, not a thug or a thief. Why do you need all this?"

Pavel walked to the door. There was a smell of cheap tobacco and an old overcoat.

— What do you mean, "all this," Ivanich?

— Yes, stubbornness is yours. I heard what the investigator offered you. Sign one piece of paper, renounce your "brothers" — and go home to your wife. Build your cabinets, marry off your daughter. But you signed up to be a martyr. For what?

The sergeant sighed, and that sigh was heavier than a prison bolt. There was no malice in it, only the endless, flat logic of a man who was used to surviving by adapting to any unevenness in the landscape.

Ivanich was the very type of material that Pavel called "pressed shavings." Individually, each splinter is worthless, but under the pressure of circumstances and the glue of government rations, they turn into a homogeneous, gray mass from which anything can be stamped out — whether a shelf for denunciations or a coffin.

— You see, Ivanov," the sergeant continued, "the world isn't made of oak. It's made of shit and sticks. And to survive in it, you have to be able to bend. I've been in the system for thirty years. I've seen heroes, I've seen scoundrels. You know who survives? Those who leave gaps.

Pavel leaned his forehead against the cold iron of the door.

— What gaps?

— Don't you know anything about carpentry? If you fit the boards tightly together, without any gaps for expansion, they will warp and break at the first sign of dampness. It's the same in life. You need to have a gap between what you think and what you sign.

They said "renounce" — renounce on paper. God, if he exists, sees the heart, not the protocol. Why are you banging your forehead against the wall? That's not faith. That's pride.

The word "pride" fell into the silence of the cell like a heavy hammer on a workbench. Pavel shuddered. Volkov had said exactly the same thing. But coming from Ivanich's mouth, it sounded scarier, because it wasn't a threat—it was advice from a "good neighbor."

— Pride... Pavel echoed. So if I want to remain honest, that's pride?

—Or not? Ivanich snorted, a cigarette light flashing in the window. "You're thinking about yourself. About how beautifully you'll stand in court, how you're suffering 'for the truth'. Have you thought about your wife? Your daughter — their lives are being ruined because of your
"I can't compromise." You're sacrificing them. That's the highest form of pride. You want everything to be perfect, down to the last millimeter. But life
— It is crooked. And the people in it are crooked.

Pavel closed his eyes. With his inner vision, he saw the structure of the tree under a microscope. When a tree grows, it accumulates internal tension. If the tree grew on a slope, one side of it is always compressed, and the other stretched. If such a board is cut incorrectly, it will instantly "warp" and may burst right under the saw, injuring the craftsman.

"Maybe I am that incorrectly sawn board?" he thought.
— "Maybe my tension is not strength of spirit, but simply a growth defect?"

— "Look at us," Ivanich persisted, his voice behind the door becoming insinuating. "We all sign what they ask us to sign. We live quietly. We keep our distance. But you want to be a monolith. Monoliths in this country are only found in cemeteries. Are your prayers in the garage really worth your child growing up an outcast?

— In construction, Ivanich, gaps are necessary for movement," Pavel said quietly, his voice taking on the professional firmness that always appeared in the workshop. "So that the wood can breathe. But there are joints that hold the whole building together. If you make a

"gap" in the load-bearing beam, the whole structure will collapse. You call it pride, but for me it's the density of the material. If I sign a lie now, I won't just ruin the paper. I will destroy the structure of my fiber. I will become like you — pressed shavings. On the outside, I'll look like a person, but on the inside, I'll be empty and sticky.

The sergeant was silent for a long time. You could hear him take a deep drag, and smoke seeped into the cell, mixing with the smell of concrete.

— You're a tough guy, Ivanov," he finally said, and a strange mixture of respect and pity crept into his voice. "But tough wood burns hotter and longer. And everyone's ashes are the same. They won't just put you in jail. They'll grind you into dust. They won't beat your body— they'll beat your family until you crack. The system doesn't like those who don't have any cracks.

If I agree to their terms, I'll be admitting that my whole life up to this point has been a failure. Pavel felt a lump rising in his throat. That I taught Anya the truth for nothing. That I promised Lena I would be her support for nothing. What kind of support am I if I'm made of dust myself?

Ivanich flicked his cigarette butt into the darkness of the corridor. "You're a fool, master. Honest, but a fool. Life isn't an oak wardrobe. It's a temporary barrack. And in a barrack, the main thing is that it doesn't leak. All right, sleep. Tomorrow at six o'clock.

The "feeding trough" slammed shut with a sharp, final sound. The clang of metal echoed in Pavel's head with physical pain. Ivanich's footsteps receded, fading into the endless perspective of the corridor until they dissolved into the general hum of the prison night.

Silence reigned in the cell, but it brought no relief. It became heavy, palpable, like a layer of dust after long sanding. The guard's words about Anna and Lena hung in the air like a poisonous fog.

Pavel sat down on the bunk again. He felt the very tension he had been thinking about growing inside him. It was not the confidence of a righteous man. It was a painful, soul-wrenching deformation.

"Pride..." The word continued to pulse in his temples. "What if Ivanich is right? What if I really love my infallibility more than my loved ones? What if my faith is just a way to prove my own exceptionality to myself?"

He imagined his wife's face. He remembered how she cried during their visit, pressing her palm against the glass. There was a gap between them—cold, bulletproof. And he himself had created that gap with his truth.

At that moment, the prison ceased to be just a building with bars. It turned into a high-security drying chamber. Here, they didn't just deprive people of freedom here — here they sucked the moisture out of the very soul, checking what would remain when all the external juices disappeared: affection, comfort, hope.

If a tree is dried too quickly, it cracks from the inside. The cracks go through the deepest layers; they cannot be repaired with wax or hidden with varnish. Pavel felt such a crack slowly creeping through his heart. He tried to pray, but the words seemed like dry sawdust to him.

He looked at his hands. In the dim light coming through the cracks in the door, they seemed foreign to him. With these hands, he had created things that were supposed to last for centuries. And now he himself was the material in the hands of a rough, unskilled craftsman named System.

"Lord," he thought, "if this is pride, burn it away. But if this is loyalty, give me strength. Because I feel my fibers beginning to tear."

Someone behind the wall cried out in their sleep. Pavel covered his face with his hands. The night dragged on like thick tar. There were still several hours left before dawn. The silence after Ivanich's departure

became his main interrogation—a silence in which he was left alone with the question: was his "ideal position" worth the ruins into which his family's life was turning?

He found no answer. He just kept sitting there, feeling the prison cold slowly penetrate to the very core of his inner being, turning a living tree into a motionless, numb stone. The grinding continued, and with each layer, what a person usually hides even from themselves was exposed.

Chapter 10. Doubt

That night, Pavel couldn't sleep. His recent conversation with Ivanich wouldn't leave him alone.

In carpentry, there is a defect called "cross grain." This is when the wood fibers do not run parallel to the trunk axis, but twist in a spiral. From the outside, such a tree may look flawless: a powerful trunk, a dense crown, bark without a single crack. But the master knows: such a board is treacherous. As soon as you start planing it, the plane blade will constantly "lift" the fibers. Such wood cannot be straightened. When drying, it warps so much that it can tear out powerful steel bolts.

Pavel suddenly realized with frightening clarity: he is this crooked layer.

All his life, he had considered his principled nature to be "straight-grained." He was proud that his word was firm, that his faith was unshakable. He had built himself up like a perfect cabinet — without a single gap, with perfectly fitting parts. But now, in this concrete drying chamber, the internal tension had become unbearable.

"Why am I here?" he asked himself into the darkness.

"For the truth," replied the familiar inner voice.

"Whose truth is it?" another voice suddenly objected, quiet and venomous. " Yours or His? Or is it just the truth of your stubbornness?"

He remembered Lena's face at their last meeting. Her reddened eyes, her thin, trembling fingers. She didn't ask him to betray her. She just looked at him as if he were already dead. Pavel felt something crack inside him. It wasn't a physical sound, but the pain was very real. It was like dried wood cracking in the silence of a warehouse — a sharp, dry snap, meaning that the piece of wood was irretrievably ruined.

He had always despised those who compromised. He considered them "trash." "pressed shavings." But Ivanich, that old prison wolf, broke through his defense with one precise blow.

— "I sacrifice them," whispered Pavel, his voice sounding strange and dry in the darkness of the cell.

This was the "selfishness of the martyr." How easy it is to be a saint when you pay for it only with your own skin! But Pavel was not paying with his own. He was paying with his daughter's future, his wife's health, and the peace of their home. He was building his "monument to loyalty" out of their lives.

If he had signed the paper that investigator Volkov had mentioned, he would have ceased to be a Master in his own eyes. He would have become a "defect." But Lena would have smiled. Anya would not have cried into her pillow. The world would not have collapsed. Just one person—Pavel Ivanov—would have stopped considering himself exceptional.

"So my exceptionality is more important to me than their happiness?" This thought was sharper than any chisel. It cut away layer after layer of his self-justifications, exposing a dark, gnarled core.

The pride of a master is not a desire for fame. It is the conviction that you know what is right and that the world must conform to your standards. It is a refusal to acknowledge that life is not a flat board that can be cut to size with a square, but a living, crooked, tangled matter.

In his workshop, Pavel had a favorite tool — an old spirit level in a heavy brass frame. He trusted it more than his own eyes. If the air bubble hovered exactly in the middle, it meant that the horizon had been found. It meant that construction could begin.

Now he felt that his inner level was broken. The air bubble darted from edge to edge, finding no rest.

Where was the line beyond which loyalty to principles turned into cruelty to loved ones? Where was the point at which fortitude became a heart of stone? Pavel tried to pray, but the prayer would not come. He felt like a tool that had long been used for purposes other than its intended ones — nails hammered in with a chisel, a level used as a weight.

He imagined that God was a true Master, and he, Paul, was just a piece of wood on His workbench. And now this Master was taking him, turning him in His hands and shaking His head: "Warped. Too much internal tension. Too many knots of pride. You can't make a load-bearing beam out of this — it will break at the most crucial moment."

This thought brought a strange, masochistic relief. If he was defective, then he no longer needed to strive for perfection. He could just be.

He began to recall his work. Cabinets, tables, chairs... He always strove to make the joints invisible. To make the wood appear as a single whole. But now he understood: he hid the seams because he was afraid of revealing the weakness of the material. He masked imperfections with varnish and polish, just as he masked his doubts with a confident tone and quotations.

And perhaps the truth lay precisely in those seams. In the gaps that Ivanich had mentioned.

"Gaps are necessary for the wood to breathe."

If life has no gaps for mistakes, for weakness, for simple human "I can't," it turns into a vice. And he was now suffocating in this vice.

He suddenly wanted to be at home so badly it hurt, so badly it made him physically sick. Not as a hero returning victorious, but as a beaten dog. Just to sit in the kitchen, hear the kettle whistling, and know that he didn't have to prove anything. He didn't need to be a "solid tree." He could just be wood chips, if those wood chips could warm his loved ones.

But then another thought came to me, even more frightening: "Will I be able to live with myself if I betray my beliefs? If I sign away everything I've ever believed in, won't I become even more of a stranger to Lena? After all, she fell in love with this very Pavel — — firm and reliable as oak. If I break down, only a shell will remain of me. I will be like a hollow door — veneer of precious wood on the outside, cardboard honeycomb on the inside."

It was a dead end. Checkmate to myself.

Chapter 11. A letter from the family

The guard handed the envelope through the "feeding slot" — a narrow window in the heavy cell door — with an indifferent look. For him, it was just a piece of mail that had passed censorship; for Pavel, it was a piece of living flesh torn from a world that now seemed like the backdrop to a forgotten dream.

Pavel sat down on the bunk, trying not to disturb his cellmates, and placed the letter on his knees. The envelope was ordinary, cheap, made of grayish paper, but it bore the purple stamp of the censor — a crude mark that violated the intimacy of the address written in Elena's familiar, slightly slanted handwriting.

Before opening the envelope, Pavel pressed it to his face. The sharp smell of cheap prison glue and official dust hit his nostrils, but somewhere deep down, on the very edge of perception, he caught something else. It wasn't perfume. It was the smell of their apartment — a subtle mixture of dried mint and that special aroma "residential building" that cannot be faked.

The paper was uneven. Elena wrote on sheets torn from a school notebook, judging by the frayed edges, in a hurry. In some places, the ink had blurred into tiny blue stars— as if drops of water had fallen on the page. Or tears. The master in Pavel instantly recognized this behavior of the material: when wood absorbs moisture unevenly, it begins to "warp," swelling and losing its geometry. So it was with these pages — they were "swollen" from what had been placed inside them.

Lena's handwriting had changed. Always calligraphically precise, it now looked tired. The letters did not stand evenly on the line, but slid down, as if the writer did not have the strength to hold the horizon.

"Hello, Pasha..." the letter began.

Elena wrote about everyday life, and behind these lines Pavel saw how their house, which he had built and repaired over the years, was slowly falling into ruin. A house without an owner is like a tree without roots: it still stands, it still seems alive, but the sap no longer rises to the top.

"The tap in the kitchen has been leaking for two weeks," Lena wrote. "I tried to tighten that nut like you showed me, but I think I just stripped the thread. Now it drips constantly. At night, the sound is like a metronome. Drip... drip... drip... It's as if someone is counting the time

we spend apart. I put a rag under it to make it quieter, but by morning it's always soaked through."

Pavel closed his eyes. He could clearly picture the faucet. All it needed was a new washer—a five-minute job. But in Lena's hands, accustomed to books and children's things, the tool became useless scrap metal. He felt almost physical pain from this minor household breakdown. In carpentry, poorly fitted parts lead to the decay of the entire structure. This dripping faucet was a symptom of systemic failure.

"The apartment has become very cold," she continued. "The windows in the large room, the ones you didn't have time to caulk before winter, are whistling. I taped them with paper tape, but it gets wet and falls off. Anya sleeps in two sweaters. We hardly ever leave the kitchen now; it's warmer there because of the stove."

The house was "cooling down." Without Pavel, it was losing its ability to retain heat — both physical and emotional. Elena didn't complain directly, she just listed the facts, but behind her statements, Pavel could hear the rumbling of the rafters collapsing.

The tone of the letter was not angry. It did not contain any accusations about his faith or his choice. And that was the hardest part. Lena's exhaustion sounded louder than any screams. It was the exhaustion of a material that had been subjected to stress for too long, stress for which it was not designed.

In engineering, there is a concept of yield strength: when metal or wood under pressure ceases to resist and begins to deform irreversibly. Lena had reached that limit.

"I sometimes catch myself," she wrote, "just standing in the middle of the hallway and not remembering where I was going. My head is empty, Pasha. I just really want you to walk through the door and put your keys on the nightstand."

The most painful part of the letter was the story about her daughter. Anna was twelve, and for her, the world had always been a reliable, wood-scented, and confident structure, headed by her father.

"Anya has changed," Elena wrote. "For the first few weeks, she drew you postcards every evening. She stacked them on your workbench in the workshop. And then... then she just stopped. Yesterday I found her in your workshop. She was sitting on the floor, scraping paint off the floor with a chisel. I wanted to scold her, but she looked at me and asked, 'Mom, did Dad leave us?' I didn't know what to say. She doesn't ask when you're coming back anymore. She's started talking about you in the past tense."

Pavel felt the cold of the cell creeping into his bones again. The child's reaction was the most honest litmus test. For Anya, his absence was a betrayal. In her childish mind, he was a craftsman who had to fix what was broken. And now he himself had become the cause of a break that could not be repaired.

The transition from anticipation to feelings of abandonment in children happens quietly. She built a protective layer around her heart, which over time would make her hard and impenetrable, but would also rob her of the ability to feel warmth.

Pavel put the letter aside and stared at the gray wall of the cell. His thoughts involuntarily returned to carpentry.

He remembered how he once tried to dry a beautiful piece of Karelian birch in an accelerated mode. He was young and confident, thinking he could cheat the nature of the wood. He created ideal conditions—temperature, airflow. But he forgot about the internal tension. The moisture from the upper layers disappeared too quickly, the fibers contracted, and the core remained wet and heavy. At some point, a sound like a gunshot rang out in the silence of the workshop. The wood burst along its entire length, disfiguring itself with a deep, jagged crack.

"I am this drying chamber," thought Pavel.

His principled nature, his "straightforwardness," which he reflected on, created an aura of holiness around him, but for his family, it became a deadly heat. He dried them with his faith, not noticing that their structure did not have the same density as his own. He demanded the strength of oak from pine.

The tension in his home had reached a peak. Lena was on the verge of breaking down, and Anya had already begun to crack. And it wasn't just investigator Volkov or the system that was to blame. It was him, the Master, who had miscalculated the load on his family's supporting structures.

Pavel picked up the letter again. At the very end, after the signature, there was a note written in very small print:

"Last week, someone from the investigator came. He said that if you sign some kind of cooperation agreement, they might transfer you to house arrest. Pasha, I'm not asking you to betray God. I'm just asking you... remember that we have a leaky faucet at home. And I don't know how to fix it."

These lines were sharper than any chisel. Elena did not ask him to become a traitor; she appealed to his role as Protector and Master. She contrasted the great heavenly truths with a simple kitchen faucet. And in this comparison, Paul's truth suddenly seemed to him something abstract and cold, like the concrete walls of the detention center, while the running water in the kitchen was alive, a real pain.

He imagined himself returning. Taking a wrench, changing the gasket. Holding Anya close, feeling her "petrified" heart slowly thaw. Hugging Lena, whose shoulders had become so thin.

But the price of this return was to admit that all his previous "Straightforwardness" was a mistake. That he must voluntarily become a "defect" in the eyes of his community in order to save those he loves.

Paul carefully folded the letter along the creases. The paper crunched— dry and brittle.

He understood that the tree of his life would never be the same again. Even if he glued these cracks together, the scars would remain forever. The only question was what he would turn this damaged material into — a pile of kindling or something resembling the Japanese art of kintsugi, where broken ceramics are glued together with gold, making the cracks part of the beauty.

Only he didn't have any gold. All he had was ink on a sheet of lined notebook paper and an unbearable, chest-tearing inner tension.

The bolt clanged in the cell. The evening check was beginning. Pavel hid the letter under the mattress, feeling its warmth continue to burn his back even through the layer of government-issued rags. He stood in line, but his eyes no longer had their former fanatical clarity.

Chapter 12. The possibility of release

The corridor of the detention center always smelled the same: cabbage boiled down to a slimy consistency, damp whitewash, and that specific, metallic smell of fear that the human body emits when deprived of space. But behind the door of Major Volkov's office, this world suddenly ended.

Pavel froze on the threshold, blinded not by brightness, but by the softness of the light. There were no government lamps in wire muzzles here. A table lamp burned under a green lampshade, flooding the room with an amber, homely glow. In the corner, an electric kettle

hummed quietly, and this sound—cozy, kitchen-like—struck Pavel in the chest harder than the guard's shout.

"Come in, Pavel Viktorovich, take a seat," Volkov pointed to a deep armchair upholstered in brown leather. "There is no truth in walking, and we have a long and, I hope, constructive conversation ahead of us today."

Pavel sat down, feeling the unfamiliar softness of the chair envelop his exhausted body. His fingers, accustomed to rough concrete and the jagged edges of prison bunks, involuntarily clenched the armrests. The leather was smooth and impeccably crafted. The craftsman inside him automatically noted, "Good work, hidden seams."

Volkov slowly poured tea into thin porcelain cups. The aroma of bergamot and something sweet wafted through the office. On a saucer lay a cookie — sprinkled with powdered sugar.

— Help yourself. My wife baked them, homemade," the major pushed the saucer closer. "You haven't had homemade food in a long time, have you, Ivanov?

Pavel stared at the cup. Steam rose in lazy curls. After the gray sludge they called tea in the detention center, this drink seemed like an elixir. He picked up the cup; his fingers trembled noticeably, and the thin porcelain responded with a barely audible, plaintive ring. The taste was thick and tart. The warmth slowly flowed down his esophagus, and for a moment Pavel felt as if he were not in prison, as if he could hear Ani's laughter or Elena's quiet voice behind the door.

This situation was a masterfully constructed trap. False comfort relaxed the will. Pavel knew that if you steam wood for too long, it first softens and bends easily, but then the price comes in the form of strength: the fibers "get tired" and elasticity decreases.

— I read your letter, Pavel," Volkov sighed, his voice sounding almost fatherly. "It's not right, of course, but I'm only human. The tap is leaking, my daughter is putting her drawings away in the workshop... It's bitter. A man should keep a home, not prop up government walls. You're a craftsman. You know what happens to a building when its owner abandons it."

Volkov paused, giving Pavel time to swallow this bitter truth along with a sip of tea. The major took a sheet of paper out of his folder— dazzlingly white, thick, smelling of fresh printing ink.

— You see, the problem with your case is... We're not monsters. The system — It's like a big machine. Rough, heavy. If a part doesn't fit , the machine won't spit it out, it will grind it down. And I want to protect you from this machine.

Pavel looked at his hands. They had changed during his months in the cell. The calluses, built up from using a plane and chisel, had begun to wear away. His skin had thinned and become somewhat transparent.

"Sanding," Pavel thought.

When a craftsman prepares wood for painting, he takes sandpaper. First, coarse sandpaper, which removes all the burrs, all the individual features of the wood. Then fine sandpaper. It removes the nap, making the surface perfect, mirror-like. But this shine comes at the cost of the thickness of the wood. With each movement of the "skin," the wood becomes less. It loses its density, its essence, turning into decorative veneer, behind which is emptiness.

— You don't need to betray anyone, Ivanov," the major tapped the sheet gently. "We've simplified everything. No 'extremist communities', no "conspiracies." Look at the wording. It's almost a formality.

Pavel moved the sheet closer. The text was printed in clear, neat font. There were no accusations of heresy or calls to renounce God. On the contrary, it sounded like a dry report from a safety inspector.

"I, Ivanov P.V., acknowledge that there were certain organizational shortcomings in the activities of our group. I acknowledge that due to the lack of proper legal control, formulations that did not fully comply with the letter of the law could creep into our meetings. My participation in these events was based on my personal beliefs, but I agree that the structure of the organization required more careful administrative adjustments..."

— See? Volkov smiled, and in the lamplight his eyes seemed kind. It's just an admission of "organizational imperfection." You're a carpenter yourself. If you see that a cabinet is crookedly assembled, you don't say that wood — is evil? You simply acknowledge that the assembly was defective. It's the same here. We simply acknowledge that the "assembly" of your community does not comply with GOST standards. Sign here, and you're free. A suspended sentence, a fine, and tonight you'll be fixing your faucet.

Paul read and reread it. The words were smooth. They did not require him to slander and curse his brothers. They only suggested "acknowledging imperfection." It seemed so reasonable, so harmless.

But in carpentry, Pavel knew that if the surface was too smooth, if it shone unnaturally, it meant that it had been covered with too thick a layer of varnish to hide the rotten core.

A war was raging inside Pavel. Elena stood before his eyes. He could smell her hair, see her wrapping herself in an old sweater in their cooling kitchen. He could hear the dripping of that very faucet, which had become a metronome of his family's destruction. One stroke of the pen, and he would be able to embrace her. He would be able to go into the workshop, breathe in the smell of sawdust, and restore the "thickness of the array" of his life.

—Come on, Pavel, Volkov continued insinuatingly. Don't be stubborn like a gnarled board. The master knows that if the wood resists too much, it is used for firewood. And pliable wood is used for furniture in the best homes. Save yourself for your family. God also wants you to be with them, not here.

Pavel felt the pen lying on the table—heavy, metal—drawing his fingers.

Chapter 13. Consequences

Choice is always a cut. When the teeth of the saw first touch the living flesh of the wood, there is no turning back: either you finish the cut, dividing the whole into parts, or you leave an ugly scar that will eventually heal over with resin, but will permanently damage the structure of the fibers.

Reality number one.

Pavel returned home on Wednesday. The twilight that day was the color of gray stain, deeply ingrained in the pores of the city. When he turned the key in the lock, the sound seemed unnaturally loud to him, like the crunch of a breaking slat.

Elena rushed to him, and her embrace was supposed to be the healing glue that would pull the edges of the wound together. But as he held her close, Pavel felt not relief, but a frightening emptiness. He was like a piece of metal that had been kept in damp conditions for too long and then suddenly exposed to the cold: outwardly, its shape was preserved, but inside, invisible processes of destruction had begun.

—"You're home," she whispered, her voice ringing with joy mixed with the remnants of horror. "My God, Pasha, you're home."

He nodded, looking over her shoulder at the wall in the hallway. There hung a coat rack he had made himself—solid oak, flawlessly sanded, perfectly angled. He used to be proud of it. Now it seemed to him a ridiculous monument to a man who no longer existed. The Pavel who had built this house did not know how to lie. That Pavel knew that if there was hidden rot in the wood, it could not simply be painted over—it would still come out, swelling the varnish into ugly bubbles.

The signature under the "confession" was just such rot. He bought his freedom at the price of his inner blueprint. To get out of prison, he had to agree to play the role of a "reformed" man, to admit that his beliefs were a "delusion," and that his friends — "tools of influence." He pasted a thin, shiny veneer of loyalty onto his life, hiding the crushed mass of his conscience beneath it.

A week later, he tried to return to the workshop. The smell of sawdust and linseed oil, which had once been the smell of life to him, now seemed suffocating. He picked up a chisel—an old, trusted tool with a handle made of burl wood. The tool felt his hands, but his hands no longer felt the wood.

Pavel looked at the ash wood blank. He could see its tension, understood where the grain was leading, but inside him there was no longer any resonance. He had become "deaf" to the material. Carpentry requires honesty: you cannot deceive wood, it will always respond to violence with a crack. And Pavel felt this crack growing inside himself.

In the evenings, he sat in the kitchen, listening to Anya doing her homework in the next room. She looked at him with adoration and secret fear, as if she was afraid he would disappear again. Elena tried to be emphatically affectionate, cooking his favorite dishes, but a silence reigned in the house that was not peace. It was the silence of pent-up tension — the kind of silence an old wardrobe makes before its doors finally warp.

— Pash, you seem... different, Elena said cautiously one evening, touching his hand. It's as if you're not here.

— I'm just tired, Lena. I need time to let the material "settle," he replied with his usual metaphor, but he himself shuddered at how false it sounded.

He wasn't "settling." He was slowly turning into an imitation of himself. Every Sunday, when he didn't go to meet with his brothers, every word he spoke in conversation with the local police officer, who now came by "just to check in," was a layer of cheap paint applied to noble wood. Underneath that paint, his soul was suffocating.

He saved his family, but lost the right to be their protector. Now he was just a functional piece of furniture in their home—serviceable, reliable in appearance, but completely dead inside. The inner rot that he had allowed into himself in the investigator's office began its slow work. He knew that in a year or two he would start lashing out at his loved ones, start drinking, or simply slip into a mechanical existence. The tragedy of his choice was that by saving his life, he had destroyed its meaning. He became a shadow, a veneer covering the emptiness where once there had been a monolith.

Reality number two.

In the second reality, the bolt on the detention center cell door did not open to release him. After he refused to sign the papers, the system's mechanism worked with the soulless precision of a sledgehammer, removing layer after layer of everything human, leaving only a hard core.

Pavel met his sentence of six years with the same calmness with which an experienced craftsman meets the news that a batch of wood has turned out to be defective and he will have to work with what he has. But this calmness came at a price.

In the colony, Pavel quickly realized that here, a person ceases to be organic. In the penal system, there is no place for fibers, only angles and planes. He was deprived of his workshop, deprived of the smell of wood, replacing it with the smell of stale sweat. His hands, accustomed to the delicacy of sanding, now grew rough from loading concrete blocks.

But the real transformation took place not in his muscles, but in his spirit. Pavel Ivanov as a person — Elena's husband, Anya's father, a carpenter who loved the silence of dawn — began to gradually fade away. In his place, a Symbol grew.

For his fellow believers on the outside, he became "Brother Ivanov, who did not bend." His steadfastness became a tool of propaganda, a banner that others carried before them. But the banner has no right to weakness, to doubt, to simply miss the smell of fried potatoes or the warmth of a woman's skin.

In this reality, Pavel became like stained oak—a tree that had lain under water for centuries without access to air. It becomes hard as stone, it does not rot, but it loses the warmth of a living tree. It becomes cold, black, and eternal.

During their rare visits through the glass, he saw how Elena was changing. She had lost weight, and early gray hairs had appeared in her hair. She spoke to him about love, but he felt that she was not talking to her husband, but to a monument. Between them stood not just a partition, but an entire ideological construct that he himself had erected by refusing to compromise.

— Anya asks why God won't help you get out, she said once, pressing her palm against the glass.

Pavel looked at her fingers. He used to be able to determine the type of wood with a single touch, but now he could only feel the coldness of the surface.

— Tell her that the material must be tested to the end, he replied he said.

Elena began to cry. Her tears did not express pride in his steadfastness, but rather only the endless, hopeless loneliness of a woman.

Pavel returned to the barracks. He lay down on the bunk, feeling his body become part of this gray, concrete world. He was no longer a carpenter. He had become a cog in the vast, incomprehensible mechanism of universal confrontation. His suffering was necessary to maintain the balance between "light" and "darkness," but in this equation, there was no place left for Pavel himself.

He was turning into an impersonal symbol. His faith, deprived of the daily practice of love and labor, crystallized into something hard and sharp, like a flake of flint.

He stopped asking questions, he stopped feeling the pain of separation — he simply "fit the mold."

The tragedy of this path was mirrored in the first: there he betrayed his spirit for the sake of the flesh, here he sacrificed the flesh to the spirit so completely that the spirit became alienated and cold. He became the perfect witness, but ceased to be human. When he is released years later, he will discover that his home is a warehouse of other people's belongings, and his family are people who have learned to live without him, replacing their living father with his iconic image. He will remain a monolith, but monoliths cannot hug.

Two realities, two paths, the same outcome.

The choice of carpenter Ivanov turned out to be a trap with no right answer. When confronted with a person who has an inner structure, the system does not seek to remake him—it seeks to destroy him, either by forcing him to betray his nature or by turning that nature into lifeless steel.

In both realities, at the end of the day, when the shadows become long and ominous, Pavel feels the same thing — the extreme fatigue of the material. The tension of the fibers has reached a critical point. There is no longer any faith or doubt. There is only the realization that the master no longer has power over his creation.

A world that smells either of cheap veneer of lies or cold concrete of holiness is equally unfit for life. And somewhere deep in his soul, in that very core that still remembers the smell of fresh wood shavings, Pavel Ivanov mourns the day when his life ceased to be just a tree and became the subject of a court case.

The material held up. But the product did not turn out. Only splinters flying from under the merciless knife of history.

Chapter 14. The Activities of Anti-Cult experts

Within the walls of RACIRS (Russian Association of Centers for the Study of Religions and Sects), "expertise" has turned into a technology for depriving a person of their right to subjectivity. A person ceases to be "Paul," a woodworker, a father, or a citizen. He becomes a "case," a set of symptoms of "mental impairment." Anti-cult experts use psycholinguistic traps to turn ordinary beliefs or convictions into legal verdicts.

Dvorkin did not act directly and almost never left any personal traces in the final decisions. He built a system in which decisions were made by others: lawyers, "experts," editors, coordinators, and executors in specific areas. Each person saw only their own part of the process, so everyone retained the comfortable feeling that "I just filled out the paperwork" or "I just gave my opinion." Together, these fragments formed a mechanism that triggered criminal consequences.

A key feature of the network's work was its sterile, bureaucratic vocabulary. Dvorkin avoided direct appeals and words like "imprison" or "punish." Instead, expressions such as "ensure consequences," "remove risks," "close the issue," "record status,"

"recognize according to the list." Such speech looked like management jargon, but in reality it led to the inclusion of a person on the list taking on a life of its own: decisions were made based on it, grounds were gathered for it, norms were adjusted for it, and then a case appeared.

This is not about one person or random coincidences. Individual participants in the network acted as distributors of the necessary wording, legitimizers through "expertise," and organizers of agreements. The task was not to prove a specific crime, but to create a manageable sequence of steps where the outcome was predictable and responsibility was blurred.

As a result, the system functioned like a conveyor belt: signatures and conclusions made "according to instructions" and "for the sake of peace" became the basis for the application of criminal law. For those who ended up on the list, this meant the risk of a real prison sentence — not an abstract "proceeding," but prison with all its consequences. At the same time, the key product for the organizers was not punishment itself, but an alibi: the opportunity to say that "everything was done according to procedure" and that no one personally demanded anything — "it just happened that way with the documents."

The anti-cult network's modus operandi:

- **Semantic labeling:** the use of marker terms ("cult," "sect," "addiction") that instantly remove the object from the protection of the law.

- **Deconstruction of motives:** any human action (helping others, rejecting violence) is interpreted by experts as a "hidden form of recruitment" or "manipulative strategy."

- **Elimination of subjectivity:** it is claimed that a person is "deprived of free will" and "under control," which means that their words

and protests have no legal force. They are an object that needs to be "repaired" or "disposal."

While previously the main target was inconvenient religious organizations, today the system's appetites have grown. The list of "destructive organizations" has been expanded to include entities that have nothing to do with religion. This proves that the original legend of "protecting spirituality" was only a cover for total control over any accumulation of social capital.

Object category	**Specific examples**	**Logic of "expert" accusation**
Religious groups	Jehovah's Witnesses	"Threat to national identity through pacifism and refusal to Recognition the state hierarchy."

Network marketing	Amway, Herbalife	"Commercial cults. Creation of horizontal financial flows that are not controlled by state corporations."
		"Pedagogical

Pedagogy	Shchetinin School	extremism. Forming an alternative type of thinking in children that cannot be subjected to standard processing."

An analysis of the activities of anti-cult organizations reveals a clear pattern: all "expert" attacks are directed at structures that compete with the Russian Orthodox Church for influence, resources, or audience attention.

Anti-cultists have become a "department" of the Russian Orthodox Church, performing the function of cleaning up the social field. If an organization offers a value system that is alternative to the officially approved one, it immediately falls under the scrutiny of experts.

•**Amway and Herbalife** ended up on the lists not because of "manipulation," but because they create communities of people connected by personal interest and trust outside the church parish. This is an alternative community structure.

• **Schetinin's school** is a blow to the very root. If children are allowed to grow up in an environment where subjectivity is valued above obedience, through, anti-cultists will be left without work, as well as the "material" for deformation.

For example, if we consider the case of Ivanov, this is a typical case that they ran through what they called a simplification protocol. First, the media launched the thesis of his "zombification" — so that the audience would have a ready-made explanation without having to figure it out. Then they looked for

"former members" who were willing to talk about "terrible secrets" and confirm the desired version in exchange for a fee. At the same time, loyal psychologists were brought in to record the "personality change" and put it into professional-sounding conclusions. By the time of the trial, Ivanov was no longer perceived as a living person with motives, rights, and a voice. In the eyes of the public and part of the system, he became an empty shell — an object of "cult influence" whose position could be ignored. The right to defense dissolved into the formula: "the examination proved insanity due to influence."

It seemed like a cold, calculated strategy: it did not require hatred for the target—a lack of empathy and a habit of treating people as material were sufficient. In this logic, "expert" structures and their affiliate networks acted as antivirus software: they did not question whether a "file" was useful and did not try to understand the context; they deleted everything that did not have the correct "digital signature" — approval from the relevant authorities, correct labeling, compliance with the internal dictionary.

At the same time, there was also an economic side to the process. The "witch hunt" became a service: every expert opinion, every conclusion, every campaign had a price, and behind that price were grants, subsidies, and direct funding from those who benefited from the monopoly on defining the norm. The destruction of network companies freed up the market for the "right" players. Pressure on law firms narrowed the opportunities for citizens to defend their property. Liquidations and bans became a legal tool, after which assets, real estate, and resources began to move. It looked not like a "spiritual battle," but like raiding disguised as scientific language and concern for safety.

Anti-cultists did not consider themselves mere researchers. They positioned themselves as engineers — those who design a "new normality." In this normality, doubt was declared a threat, searching was declared a deviation, and human complexity was declared a system error. All that remained was the noise of approval and the silence of obedience.

When the lights went out in their office, numbers and statuses remained on the monitors. Ivanov ceased to be a subject in their internal system and turned into a line: "resource" with a mark indicating completion of processing. His subjectivity was legally destroyed, his

beliefs were labeled "deviant delusions," and his family was broken up by "preventive conversations" and a chain of indirect pressure.

Dvorkin's agents won not because their arguments were always stronger. They won because they seized the right to define. They became the masters of the dictionary — and thus the masters of reality: as long as terms are controlled, any manifestation of humanity can be called a "destructive act" and framed as a threat.

Today they come for Jehovah's Witnesses, tomorrow for vitamin sellers, the day after tomorrow for lawyers and teachers. It was the logic of a tumor: it grows as long as the organism is alive. But unlike cancer, this system called itself "immunity."

The modern anti-cult "expert" in this construct was not a scientist or a priest, but a technician of dehumanization. His task was to make it easier for society to breathe when another "different" person was rolled into the concrete of procedure. After all, this is done "for safety's sake." After all, "the experts said" that he was no longer human.

True silence comes not when everyone falls silent, but when no one can speak for themselves anymore.

Chapter 15. The Taste of Power

Alexander Leonidovich Dvorkin's office smelled of freshly ground coffee and old paper—he valued this specific aroma of intellectual superiority above all else. He was not an investigator. He did not carry a service weapon and never wore handcuffs. His tool was the Word. He was the leading expert at the Center for Spiritual Security, a linguistic architect capable of turning an ordinary walk in the park into a "conspiratorial movement of a cell" and reading the Scriptures into an "act of psychological suggestion."

He glanced out the window at snow-covered Moscow and pulled the keyboard toward him. He had to finish the final conclusion that would decide Ivanov's fate.

1. The Genesis of the Label: A Linguistic Invention

Alexander Leonidovich began the section "Methodological Foundations." He wrote confidently, deriving almost physical pleasure from how malleable the Russian language was in the hands of a master.

"The term **'totalitarian sect**,**'** introduced in 1993, is not a product of classical religious studies. It is a high-precision tool created to label social groups whose internal autonomy poses a threat to the state's monopoly on meaning."

He paused, squinting slightly. Deep down, he knew that in the academic circles of Oxford or the Sorbonne, he would be laughed at. Classical science knew no such concept. A sect was simply a splinter group. But the prefix "totalitarian" worked wonders. It instantly shifted the discussion from the realm of freedom of conscience to that of national security. It brought to mind Hitler, Stalin, and barbed wire.

Alexander Leonidovich felt himself to be the heir to a great tradition. He remembered how, in 1992, he returned from the United States, bringing with him not theological treatises, but the methodology of American anti-cultists—specialists from CAN (Cult Awareness Network). But there, in the West, these ideas were stifled in the courts, failing to withstand scientific scrutiny. In Russia, however, on the fertile ground of the post-Soviet vacuum, they flourished.

Alexander Leonidovich adapted Western anti-cultism. He understood that in order to destroy a group of people, you don't need to shoot them — you need to "correctly."

For him, Pavel Ivanov was not a subject. He was material.

When Alexander Leonidovich wrote, *"The subject shows signs of deep indoctrination,"* he felt like God. At that moment, the real Pavel Ivanov, who loved the smell of pine shavings and read fairy tales to his children at bedtime, ceased to exist. In his place appeared the "adept."

This was the highest form of power—the right to determine what was real. If Alexander Leonidovich decided that Ivanov's kindness was "love bombing" (a manipulative recruitment technique), then the entire honest life of Pavel would turn into evidence. If he called his honesty "instructive behavior," then morality becomes a symptom of illness.

He liked this simplification. A living person is too complex, with too many contradictions, light and shadow. An expert opinion, on the other hand, makes the world flat, understandable, and controllable. It turns the multidimensional array of human life into a convenient table for the prosecutor.

Pavel Ivanov is like solid oak. Dense, with a unique grain pattern, a history of growth, knots, and cracks. It is life itself. But Alexander Leonidovich takes a thin, almost weightless layer of lies, this "black veneer" of expert definitions, and carefully sticks it on top. The layer is so thin that it does not change the shape of the object, but it completely changes its color and perception.

Now, whoever looks at the "object" does not see a noble tree. They see a black, ominous surface. Neighbors see not Pavel, but a "sectarian." The judge sees not a person, but a "threat to the constitutional order."

"The magic of veneer," thought Alexander Leonidovich, "is that it does not require the complete destruction of the original. It is enough to change its appearance. A lie must be frighteningly logical. It must not contradict the facts; it must reinterpret them."

If Ivanov speaks of love for God, Alexander Leonidovich writes about "super-valuable ideas." If Ivanov speaks of peace, Alexander

Leonidovich writes about "latent aggression toward social institutions." The black veneer lay flat, without bubbles.

Alexander Leonidovich moved on to the chapter "Psychological Influence and Control of Consciousness." He knew, that the concept of "brainwashing" had been recognized as pseudoscience by the American Psychological Association back in the 1980s. But in his office, it was absolute truth.

He masterfully wove together the fears of the average person and bureaucratic language. He understood that anti-cultism is not a science, but a form of modern inquisition, where instead of theological heresies, they seek "psychological destruction."

"We do not persecute for belief," he whispered, repeating his favorite phrase, which he often uttered on television. "We protect the mental health of the nation."

This was the "taste of power." He could declare an entire denomination to be a viral infection. He could deprive thousands of people of their right to inner peace simply by declaring that their will did not belong to them, that it had been "hacked" and "reprogrammed."

It was brilliant: if a person's will is suppressed by "mind control," then their testimony in their own defense is meaningless. Their words are the words of "firmware," not those of a person. Thus, Ivanov was deprived of the right even to his own defense. Everything he said in court would be interpreted by Alexander Leonidovich as a "defensive reaction of the cult."

Dvorkin glanced at the mailing list for his conclusion. Copies would go to the Investigative Committee, the FSB, and the local diocese. The RACIRS system, built over three decades, worked like Swiss clockwork. It was a network of like-minded people, "little Dvorkins," who did the same thing in every region of the country — sticking on veneer.

He recalled a conference in 2001 where his colleagues openly discussed
"names and addresses." They did not shy away from calling for the fight against dissent. But Alexander Leonidovich was more subtle. He preferred sterility. Why throw a brick through a window when you can throw an expert opinion on the judge's table? The effect is the same, but your hands remain clean.

He added a reference to a 2017 Supreme Court ruling to the text. It was a triumph for their method. On that day, the justice system officially recognized that prayer in a private home could be "a continuation of the activities of an extremist organization."

Dvorkin finished typing. It was seven o'clock in the evening. He printed out the opinion — thirty pages that would send Pavel Ivanov to prison for six years.

He reread the last sentence:

"Given the subject's persistent indoctrination and rigid adherence to destructive ideologies, social rehabilitation in conditions of freedom appears impossible. During the analysis of verbal and behavioral attitudes, it was established that the subject demonstrates conviction in the exclusive truth of his own religious doctrine, contrasting it with other worldview systems, which forms an attitude of spiritual superiority over others. This position is imposing in nature and contributes to the incitement of religious discord. The subject poses a threat to the spiritual security of citizens.

He carefully signed each page. His signature was bold and confident.

At that moment, he felt a slight dizziness—that very "taste of power" that intoxicated him more than any wine. He had just erased a person. Only an "object" remained on the paper. Pavel Ivanov, carpenter, husband, father, disappeared into the white space of the sheet.

Alexander Leonidovich stood up, put on his coat, and turned off the light. Silence reigned in the office. It was the very "Silence" that the system had been building for years. A silence in which no cry for help could be heard, because the expert had proven that this cry was nothing more than a "programmed reaction of an adept."

He went out into the street. People were passing by—ordinary, unremarkable people. Dvorkin looked at them and involuntarily classified:
"potentially vulnerable," "prone to conformity," "subject to prevention." The world ceased to be a place of encounters for him; it became a global filing cabinet.

He got into his car and turned on the radio. They were reporting on the "discovery of another cell." Alexander Leonidovich smiled. He knew whose words were coming out of the speaker. His words had become flesh. His definitions had become law.

He was a linguistic god in a country that preferred expert lies to the living truth. And this taste of power—the taste of complete, ultimate control over someone else's conscience— was the most exquisite he had ever tasted.

Pavel Ivanov will hear his sentence tomorrow. But the sentence was passed today, here, in the silence of the office. After all, the architecture of oppression always begins not with torture chambers, but with definitions.

And Alexander Leonidovich was the best architect in this business.